

GRIM DEATH

*The Not at Night
Series*

1. NOT AT NIGHT
2. MORE NOT AT
NIGHT
3. YOU'LL NEED A
NIGHTLIGHT
4. GRUESOME
CARGOES
5. BY DAYLIGHT
ONLY
6. SWITCH ON THE
LIGHT
7. AT DEAD OF NIGHT
8. GRIM DEATH

GRIM DEATH

Selected and Arranged by
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IF YOU SLEEP IN THE MOONLIGHT

J. LESLIE MITCHELL

1900-250000



IF YOU SLEEP IN THE MOONLIGHT

IF YOU sleep in the moonlight you dream.

That was what he had been doing. God, what a dream !

Suddenly awake, he found himself still sobbing, tense and high strung, the blood pounding in his ears. Nightmare. This infernal moonlight !

The rest of the room was in shadow, but across his face and pillow lay a beam of white radiance from the window, a wandering searchlight-shaft out of the surrounding night and stillness. Warm and pringling, he brought his hands into the beams and covered his face with them. God, what a dream !

He lay clutching his face. Remote across the mellow autumn night a dog bayed. The moonlight. A little wavelet of perfume drifted out of the darkness and lapped him. That bowl of Michaelmas daisies on the mantelshelf. . . .

He found the pressure of his fingers begin to relax involuntarily, his breath to come more easily. With a little laugh he unblinded his eyes, so for a moment blinding them again in the moon-radiance. He leant out of bed and groped in the blackness for the glass of iced water on his bedside table.

Abruptly its cold, smooth shape fitted into his fingers. He withdrew them with a gasp, lay petrified a moment, then, again in the grip of nightmare remembrance, scrambled erect in a wild disorder of sheets. The sounds sifted to stillness across the room. That ice-cold touch. . . .

You fool, she's lying beside you.

But he found he could not look. His left arm crept out across the pillows and then withdrew against his will. . . . Of course she's there, lying full-stretched in

that way she has, hand under her cheek, hair a dark blot in the moonlight, one shoulder bare. Fast asleep you fool. . . .

Then listen for her breathing.

He listened. The night and its silences came into the room, listening also, crowding round the bed. The sweat started out on his forehead.

Silence.

He broke it with a sudden groan which echoed throughout the room, and then abruptly was caught and extinguished by the waiting quietness. He flung aside the sheets, closed his eyes, and pantingly, a shadow wrestling outside the moonlight beam, groped and pounded on the place where she should have lain. The dull thwacks of his blows sounded to his own ears oddly muffled.

Suddenly the watching shaft of moonlight vanished.

At that he desisted and swung round in the dishevelled bed, empty but for himself. Then he saw. The curtain was bellying and drifting across the window in a little waft of wind. Slowly it refurled and recoiled as he leant on his knuckles and watched it.

The moonlight slipped into the room again. Below, in the darkness of the dining-room, the clock struck four.

His frenzy had dropped from him. Dully, carefully, he got out of bed. The polished wood of the floor rose cold and radiant and faintly grainy to meet his feet. He stumbled to the window and put his head out into the moonlight and night air.

Far across the sleeping town the dog bayed again.

No dream. He remembered it all now. Coolly, detachedly, he found himself remembering each detail.

The house was utterly quiet. He looked round the room, looked down at his hands stealthily, then jerked them up, peered at them closely, smelt them. And a sudden test occurred to him. He lifted them up before his eyes, against the moonlight, to see if they trembled. But in the wavering sheen he could not be sure. Not even of the hand which had . . .

It was with his left hand he had struck her. Just below the chin, with the curved point of the old jack-knife kept in the boot-cupboard. He remembered now the undreamlike impact of the blow, and her panting fall, and how surprised he had been that the blood had not gushed out, as he had always imagined it would.

Often enough, in the mounting shame of the past few months, he had imagined that happening. But it had merely oozed a little red-rimmed patch, and his care in catching her as she fell and turning her over so that the kitchen linoleum might bear no stain of evidence had been needless. He had knelt and peered closely into her face then, noting the startled amaze of her eyes and the twitching of her mouth. After that she had lain very still, and he had risen and gone to the sink and had drunk some water.

Standing now in the moonlight he drank again, his hand steady. But as he lifted the glass he felt his arms ache. That was because of her weight in carrying her to the outhouse and laying her in the old tool-chest.

She had been surprisingly heavy. Not that light weight his arms had known at other times—that first time of all, in the hayfield by the sea. She'd laughed up at him then, with the sunlight on her face, and covered her lips as he bent to kiss them, and they'd struggled a little, absurdly, in the sunlight and sea-sound, and a gull had come circling in from the hidden shore and swooped and cawed beside them. She'd laughed at that, dropping her hand from her mouth, following the bird with her eyes while he kissed her unshielded lips . . .

She'd left her lips unshielded to many since then.

(Why was the house so quiet?)

The curtain eddied towards him on another ghostly puff of wind. He put out his hand to steady it, and at that the moonlight ran nimbly up his arm. He stared at it, listening to the thumping of his own heart. If you sleep in the moonlight you dream.

Once she'd told him that, idly, sleepily, in his arms, when they'd looked out together at the full moon. He'd

never imagined then there were other arms she could occupy with just such content. He'd gone all unknowing the facts for years. Till men glanced at him and grinned, and women's looks were pitying, and hints of his humiliation multiplied and grew in volume till, lying beside her at nights, they had deafened him like the roar of that sea beside which he had first kissed her. . . .

Light of weight then, with her face a meeting-place of sun and laughter. Not like that white blotch in the darkness of the tool-chest, a floating thing glimpsed a moment in the blackness as he'd closed the lid and tiptoed back to the kitchen.

(Two hours ago. The clock had struck two as he'd come up the stairs alone.)

He started. A warm bead of perspiration had rolled from his scalp to his shoulder. Yet his body was shivering with cold.

He got into bed again. The clock below struck the half-hour, and at that, as if awaiting the signal, the moonlight veered suddenly from his pillow and did not return. He lay in the darkness, cold, yet feeling his throat beginning to perspire unaccountably. To-morrow he would bury the body. . . .

To-morrow. But what was happening to it out there, alone and cold in the blackness?

Could it, did it, move? Somewhere he'd read that though the heart may cease to beat, the brain may not immediately die. Supposing that behind that cold, battered face there were still thoughts—cold, slow thoughts, with no power to impress their urgings on the surrounding body, with dead nerves which could no longer carry the messages to action. . . . But what if they could? If, impelled by some overwhelming purpose, that dead body could set itself in motion, burst open the chest, come out? . . .

In the dimness he grinned to himself strainedly. That was how others had given themselves away: they had imagined just such impossible things in just such still and waiting hours—had imagined them until they had

become real. They had thought of the blind, dead body slowly creeping from the tool-chest, crossing the garden, unlatching the kitchen window, creeping through, opening with dead, cold purpose the kitchen door which gave upon the passage. . . .

What was that?

A creak, a far ghost-draught of air. He had left the kitchen door unlatched, of course. It could not be the body, face blood-oozing, sightless, coming along the passage-way, shuffle, shuffle, dead steps in the dark. Down at the foot of the stairs now, slowly, gropingly, turning to mount. . . .

He sprang out of bed with a thud, stamped his feet, and thereat the sounds ceased. Or did they? The Thing had turned, it had crossed to the sitting-room.

Crash!

The door below slammed and shook.

Desperation came upon him. He seized the electric torch from his bedside table, pulled open the bedroom door and thudded downstairs. Towards where, in the blackness, he sensed was the foot of the stairs, he ceased to run and stood listening with a pounding heart.

Thereon, with a winking, vanishing spear-beam of moonlight, the sitting-room door slammed again. As it did so something clammy chilled his face, and the clinkle of an overturned utensil came from the kitchen. . . .

He gave a croaking sob, reached the foot of the stairs in lurching bounds, crossed the hall. Whimpering, he caught the handle of the sitting-room door—always loose on its catch—flung it open, and flashed his electric torch within. Lying on the table, the first object focused in the shaft of light, lay a sheet of paper.

He heard a sighing moan which he realized came from himself. He stood staring at the scrap of paper, remembering it. Shaking, he bent to re-read it.

It was the note from his wife which he had found awaiting him on his return home the previous evening. She had gone to the theatre and would probably stay with a friend and not return home till morning. . . .

He had dreamt it all. Oh, God, a dream after all !
If you sleep in the moonlight you dream.

An immense relief came on him, and with it a blinding, searing vision. This last nightmare hour of his—it might have been born of reality, with no awakening, no letter of salvation to end it, had his angry seethings and plottings of last evening found vent. For he had guessed the identity of the friend with whom she had gone to stay. Murder in his heart, he had ranged through the rooms, peering from the windows down the street. Till exhaustion had come upon him and he must have dragged himself upstairs.

A gurling moan came from behind him.

Torch in hand, he swung round confidently. Again in his face, for a moment, blew something cold.

That damned kitchen door.

With feet growing cold, he padded along the passage in the dead silence, through the kitchen and there found that the outer door had been verily left ajar. Hand on latch, he stopped and peered out into the moonlight.

He did not remember having left the door open.

How could he have done so ? *That was a part of his dream.*

He smiled strainedly at the thought. Through the dim sheen bulked the outhouse. He made to close the kitchen door and then stopped.

A nameless force swept him from the doorway, carried him down the garden path. He tore open the outhouse door, stumbled within, and flashed his torch upon the open tool-chest.

And presently, through the still night and startling quiet folk from their beds, there rose scream upon scream of an insane horror.

If you sleep in the moonlight you dream.

ISLAND OF DOOM

BASSETT MORGAN

ISLAND OF DOOM

WHEN Tom Mansey's schooner dropped anchor in the pretty lagoon and he set out in a small boat for shore, he saw the colour of a woman's dress as Nell Evans ran down the path to meet him, followed a moment later by her tall husband.

As his boat, sculled by a Tonga boy of his crew, slipped over the clear water and tinted coral gardens below, he had time to see the amazing improvements that Evans had made in a year on the island foreshore, hedges of flowering shrubs, crushed coral path leading to a pretty bungalow built of coral blocks and chunks of lava rock brought from the slope of that extinct volcano which reared its brown crest like the cowed head of a monk brooding in the distance.

Then Mansey was startled to see Nell Evans emerge from the hedge leading by one paw a young orang-outang which shrank closer to her side at the sight of strangers. In the enthusiastic warmth of greetings from Evans and his wife, who had not seen a white man since Mansey dropped them and their belongings on the island a year ago, the orang-outang broke away and scuttled to the house. Mansey was no sooner settled in a porch chair and answering the hundreds of questions fired at him in wistful hunger of exiles marooned at the back of beyond, than the orang-outang came from the house carrying a tray with glasses and a bottle.

Bill Evans roared with laughter at Mansey's dumb-founded expression.

"I caught him the week after you left us, and Nell has trained him as a housemaid," he said.

"Bill is away so much of the time fussing with his experiments that I was lonely," Nell said defensively. "I always spoiled our cats and dogs at home. I trained

gold-fish to swim through my fingers. Our canaries could put on a very good entertainment of tricks I taught them. And I couldn't resist Little Willie."

The ape stood patiently while Evans uncorked the bottle and poured drinks; then he carried the tray to Nell and Bill and Mansey.

"Making a henpeck and sissy of Little Willie saved her teaching me to jump when she spoke," laughed Evans.

Mansey did not like the idea of the great ape being a companion for Nell Evans, but then he would never have brought a pretty and intelligent young wife to this far-away tip of a submerged mountain peak far out of the track of cargo boats, or even native craft, which will go anywhere for a price. For undisturbed quiet in which Bill Evans could pursue his biological and anatomical studies it was ideal, fair as a garden of the Lord and lacking none of the potentialities of hell. Evans had inherited wealth enough to make him independent, had been a successful surgeon who resented catering to the usual neurotic crowd among a physician's patients, and broke away to experiment with anatomy in the raw.

The company for which Mansey was a valued free-lance scout, flying squadron and riot officer, gave the Evanses into his charge, and he made a thorough job of finding a place where they could pursue Evans' hobby unmolested.

An hour after he landed Mansey realized it was not too lonely a place. Bill Evans took him to a crocodile pool he had made and furnished with baby muggers, surrounded by ferns and rock walls that protected a shallow beach.

Small snouts rested on floating logs or shore roots. But on shore three little crocs humped their backs and began to pick at grain which Evans scattered, then tried to scratch, for all the world like hens in a barnyard, making odd noises in their leathery throats. Mansey laughed and asked what ailed them, then stared.

"Neither bird nor beast nor good red herring," said

Bill Evans. "I've given a fowl's brains to crawling reptiles. It's a fact," he added, as Mansey looked incredulous. "I'd like to try that experiment on a snake and see it try to stand on its tail and crow at the rising sun."

"Kidding me?" Mansey asked.

"Absolutely not. I transplanted hen brains in those muggers' heads. Birds and reptiles are closely related, you know. I only wish I could live long enough to set the strain."

"Bill, you'd better come outside again. This sort of thing will send you bugs," commented Mansey, but Evans smiled.

"Think what surgery could do with this sort of thing," he said. "Dink Forster, an old college mate of mine, and I used to try it with various small animals until we managed to have them survive our surgical clumsiness of early days. I've got ideas. Think of planting the brain of a mongoose in the head of a tiger and lowering the cobra deaths of India, for instance. Only the discrepancy in size must be overcome, smaller tigers or larger mongooses. Come and see my workshop. I built it away from the house because Nell has all a woman's shrinking from the surgical art, although she is for all I try to do."

They left the pool by a path which led towards a blazing wall of crimson bloom where Little Willie, the young orang-outang, stood with a basket containing chunks of meat from wild pigs.

"Fly-trap orchids," said Evans, "cultivated and bred for size and ferocity. Nell trained Little Willie to feed them."

A stout wall of bamboo supported the trunks of two vines, but their branches had swarmed to trees which were smothered by the parasitic growth. The flowers were prodigious monstrosities with a petal spread of three feet like curved scarlet leather, black throats from which came a lethal stench that Mansey felt in sudden dizziness despite the sea wind blowing briskly that morning. The horrible flowers swayed like the wobbling heads of

dromedaries or inflated hoods of cobras in the direction of the ape and his basket of meat, which his paw tossed in bits to a black throat. Instantly the petals closed on the meat with a creak like rubbed leather, and a dozen other heads snatched towards that closed maw, their scarlet petals quivering like the jaws of a cat stalking a bird. They even darted at the ape, which moved nimbly from that touch.

"They can draw blood," commented Evans, "as Little Willie found out long ago. I don't dare let these things propagate, or they'd kill all animal life on the island in time. I keep two roots and burn the branches I cut off. Look at that ape!"

Little Willie was tormenting a cluster of giant blooms by waving a larger chunk of meat just beyond their reach. A mass of flowers shot out, and the massive bamboo creaked with the strain before the ape tossed it and they writhed in horrible combat close to the parent stem. Little Willie's jaws opened in a weird grin and cackle of monkey mirth. Mansey saw the stems, thick as a man's leg, pulsing between closed blooms that hung like yellow gourds, as the flesh was absorbed.

"It's beastly, and I don't see what it proves," said Mansey.

"Every man to his own hobby," said Evans. "The orchids are just a whim of mine. My interest is in animal experiments and a new outlet for surgery. For instance, Dink Forster is back there studying cancer and salvaging a few more months of life for its victims, prolonging misery for people afflicted in various ways and balled because it isn't half the job a junkman could do with old automobiles by taking the good parts and assembling one workable machine. Think, if we could take human wrecks and use the best bits! That's what my surgery is for."

He started away, and Mansey was glad to leave the vicinity of the monstrous vampire flowers to which Little Willie rapidly tossed the last scraps and left one neglected bud foraging in the empty basket he dropped. He swung

after Evans and Mansey, flying through trees of which great branches dropped with his weight, then crashed back when released.

Moist heat on the jungle trail wrapped their faces like warm wet gauze. Mansey dripped sweat before they came to the crater slope on the foot of which stood a coral block building with glass walls on two sides, surrounded by a high fence of bamboo. In the well-equipped operating-theatre were heavy cot-beds smoothly padded and fitted with many binding straps, cases of instruments, all the paraphernalia of a small hospital surgery, and two white-coated Chinese bowed politely as Evans introduced his assistants.

"They attended college in my time," he said, "and shared the brain transplantations with Dink Forster and me. Come and see my latest stunts." But Mansey shook his head.

"I don't like it," he said frankly.

Back at the house he bathed and changed his clothes, then sat on the porch with Nell Evans until dinner was prepared by the native servants they had brought with them to the island. Little Willie sat puffing a cigarette, apparently enjoying a smoke. Then his fingers began pleating the hem of Nell's dress. Mansey remembered his own mother and other women picking up an apron to pleat the hem. He noticed after that that every dress Nell wore had those pleat marks from the fingers of the ape, which was devoted to its mistress. He saw Little Willie sweep and wash dishes, dust a room, even straighten a framed picture of Dink Forster which hung on the house wall.

"You've made a girl of Little Willie," he commented as the ape laid his head on Nell's lap and sighed almost humanly. "But you should be petting your own son instead of that creature. And he should be swinging through trees, frightening smaller monkeys and picking his own fleas."

Nell laughed, but it sounded wistful.

"I daren't risk a baby here. And I can't turn Little Willie loose now. You know, of course, that wild apes kill one that has been tamed."

"Go outside and have a family while Bill is experimenting," said Mansey brutally. "Dance and play, for fear the fate of tamed monkeys might be imitated among humans when you do go out."

"Stop it!" she cried suddenly, passionately. "Don't you imagine I have heart-aches enough without you reminding me? Bill will never leave the island. But we need company. I'm tempted to write Dink Forster and tell him what Bill is doing. He'd be wild to come. Only——"

"The very thing," cried Mansey. "His opinion would be worth something if he told Bill to cut out this crazy experimenting and take you outside."

"No," she said quietly, lowering her voice. "Poor Dink! You see, I was once engaged to Dink. I'm not boasting when I say he was pretty wild about me. I eloped with Bill. And if you knew Dink you'd realize I'm afraid to have them meet. Dink is the kind that never forgets or forgives. Look!" She led Mansey to his picture on the wall, across which was written "Till death. Dink." A handsome, clever-looking face, yet passionate and sensual. Recalling Bill Evans' lank, rugged profile, Mansey decided Nell had been wise to choose Bill and keep the two men apart.

"Nevertheless I'm so proud of what Bill's doing that I've written Dink a bulky letter telling him about it. You'll post it for me from Port Moresby, please?"

Mansey left the island with a feeling of escape from smouldering peril gathering for a holocaust, a crawling fury due to Evans' tampering with natural forces, a vengeance of beast life hovering ready to pounce. He would rather have dropped Nell's letter in the sea. Some day he would be bringing out Evans' widow, and he hoped to God it would not be too late to save her reason.

For five consecutive years he called with supplies and

came away still more repulsed with the miracles of Evans' surgery; then he saw the shadow lower. Evans wasn't well. Confidentially he gave Mansey a letter to Dink Forster, asking him to come and see what might be done to ward off inroads of on organic trouble, and see for himself Evans' experiments. Perhaps Dink would be interested enough to stay and work with him, in cases . . .

"Come outside to a hospital," urged Mansey.

"And let this work waste? Not while I live. But don't tell Nell. Dink wanted to marry her, and I won out. She thinks Dink will have it in for me. But that was long ago. We outgrow those kind of disappointments."

Mansey again mailed a letter, with forebodings of trouble. Months later, when he reported to company headquarters, they told him a man had been waiting five weeks for his return to take passage on his schooner for the Evans' island. And when Mansey met Richard Forster, who could write half the alphabet after his name, he knew Nell Evans' instinct had been intuitive.

"So you're the man who has kept me waiting," he began. "Well, I'll be on your boat in an hour."

"I'll send word when I'm sailing," said Mansey curtly and turned away. Not even the company dictated in that tone to Tom Mansey, who knew weather, natives, and perils of that stretch of tropic seas. What could be done Mansey leaped to do. If he shook his head the matter dropped. Perhaps men died, but they would have died anyway. God seemed far away from some horrors down there.

In three days he sent his Tonga mate for Doctor Forster. The schooner would sail in an hour. When the hour was up Forster had not come. Mansey breathed easier and gave orders to lift the mud-hooks; there was trade along the north shore he very much wanted to pick up, and delay might give Nell Evans a chance to marry again outside and dance as a pretty woman should. Damn these cocksure high-falutin' nabobs of civilization, telling Tom Mansey what to do and when! Let Forster hire a native craft and swelter in broiling suns at sea,

stew under a low thatch by night and find Evans if they could.

His vessel was swinging for the outer sea when Forster sauntered to the wharf, grew excited, waved white-duck arms and long slender hands, then hired a fuzzy-haired Papuan with a proa to deliver him on Mansey's outgoing schooner. It made intercourse strained, but Mansey was not a talker. He nursed his pipe, and his glance told the Tonga boys what to do. His silence got on Forster's nerves.

"I've been summoned by Evans for professional services."

"Naturally," stated Mansey. Red crept up Forster's cheeks.

"You know the Evanses well?"

"Slightly. I call there once a year with supplies."

"Ever see their tame orang-outang?"

"The yit is full of monkeys," said Mansey, and he went below to change into pyjamas, damning Dink Forster. Cold, calloused exterior. Boiling lava beneath. Like a volcano oozing a thread of vapour to show what lay beneath ready to rouse and blow up everything. Later Forster said:

"Mansey, I began wrong with you. I didn't know you, and I'd waited——"

"Six or seven years," Mansey finished amazingly.

"It seemed that long," Forster laughed harshly, but it was his last attempt to iron out the spiked and bristling wall of suspicion between them.

The weather was fine, the sea by day a shimmering plane on which wind blew so gently that it carried spiced land scents. In the schooner's shadow they could see coral and fish. The nights were purple gauze entangled with low stars. The engine throb was a thudding heart burdened with tragedy. Mansey wished he need not find that tiny dot of an island among the fly-specks of green earth mottling those seas. But Nell Evans loved Bill, and she had been such a gamester. . . .

His boat arrived in the night, and they went ashore

where lanterns hung on the tiny lagoon wharf, and found little Willie carrying a light as he stood beside Nell Evans. She greeted Forster with a cry that held an eerie, spoken note; then hunger for sight of some other white person crowded down her woman's instinct.

Evans' face had changed with the strides of pain stalking him night and day, and Forster's gaze lingered on him with professional appraisal. Mansey went to the rest-room early and left them talking of old days, but was awakened at the break of silver dawn to see Forster in pyjamas standing beside his bed.

"Mansey, I've a favour to ask. Start away with me now."

Mansey considered silently, then shook his head in refusal. He hated cowards. Forster had evidently found he still loved Nell Evans. Let him prove it by saving Bill's life for her.

"Persuade Bill and his wife to go outside with us and I'll do it," he countered.

"Honestly, I tried that. They won't go."

"Then I don't see how you can refuse to help Evans. Isn't it sort of ethical to do what you can professionally?"

Forster turned on his heel and left the room. Nell Evans did not take anything at breakfast but clear coffee, and she was forcing her gaiety, relating college escapades gallantly, leading their laughter. After breakfast Bill and Forster started for the surgery, and Nell sat with Mansey on the porch looking like a stricken woman, with Little Willie pleating her dress hem until it got on her nerves and she sent him to feed the vampire orchids with meat.

Mansey followed the ape, watching the horrid feast of flowers on flesh, hearing Little Willie's cackling mirth as he tormented the blooms which writhed to reach the titbit, their stems twisting like pythons, and those of the fed bulbs closed on their prey, throbbing in repletion.

Then the ape began cutting upthrust stem buds from the earth, tuberous and blanched. He smoothed the earth and filled his basket with the cuttings, then swung through the trees towards the hill. He performed as much work

as any three of the lazy native servants ; his body was full-grown, immensely powerful, and his trained intelligence amazing. Mansey heard the voices of Evans and Forster at the crocodile pool, and he joined them, listening quietly to Forster's enthusiastic comments on Evans' experiments.

For days the two surgeons were together in the surgery and at the pool, and Forster was going even further in brain transplantations than Evans. Little Willie brought small monkeys for their experiments, and Nell Evans shuddered when at last she spoke of it to Mansey.

"Tom, I want a trip outside while this is going on. I haven't told Bill yet, because he hasn't been well lately, but something has happened which makes me want to go outside for a time. Perhaps Dink Forster will be interested enough to stay and go on with this work, and Bill will follow me if I make a home somewhere else, Sydney or Hongkong. You see, I'm expecting a baby."

"Why not tell Bill and take him outside with you ?" Mansey suggested. He was glad of her decision and this new interest in her life.

"No. Not yet. Wait till Dink is fascinated enough to take over the work, and I have our home ready. Then Bill will come contentedly, and I won't feel I've torn him away."

Mansey thought another reason drove Nell Evans away. Even he could see plainly the smouldering passion of Forster for the girl who had once jilted him. Even the ape sensed it and crouched near her, growling at Forster and refusing to make friends, always at his habit of pleating the hem of her dress until it got on Nell's nerves, and in desperation she hung one of her dresses on a bamboo rack that stood on the porch, so that the ape could pleat the fabric of that garment instead of the one she was wearing.

When Nell spoke of wanting a trip outside Bill Evans was enthusiastic about the plan.

"You need a change, Nell. You can dance and play around."

"Suppose I liked it so well I didn't return, would you come and visit me sometimes?" she asked laughingly.

"Don't tempt me. I never could resist you," he teased, and pressed his hand to her cheek. Forster smoked a cigar vehemently. Then Evans strolled off under the moon and Forster began:

"Nell mustn't know, but Bill is a sick man. I'm glad she is going outside for her confinement. I'll try to do something for Bill while she is gone. She knows about our experiments and it horrifies her, so she is better away just now. I don't think she should be so much in the power of that ape. Suppose it turned savage."

Mansey agreed about the ape. And two days later when Nell was starting away with him, the ape seemed to sense a separation; for he went beside Nell to the wharf, and when she got into the small boat to start for the anchored schooner it flew into a rage, leaping up and down grotesquely, screeching its anger, raced along the shore, baffled by the water it would not enter.

Nell ran below to her cabin, but Mansey stayed on deck watching as Evans tried to calm the beast. He saw the ape finally fly towards Forster, who was near the porch and leaped for a gun standing against the house wall. The schooner was too far away for the report of the gun to sound more than a dull "plup", but the succeeding shots from Evans' heavy revolver, always at his hip, carried clearly. Mansey could not see the end of the tragedy. He was glad Nell Evans need not know what happened.

Four months later he was startled to find Nell Evans waiting at Port Moresby for his return. She had established a home in Sydney and was impatient to see her husband and coax him away. Mansey begged her not to go to the island, in vain. She had new and pretty dresses and looked younger, happier, handsomer. He crowded his schooner for speed, and anchored in the island lagoon just after dawn one morning, taking Nell ashore at once.

The boat scarcely touched the sand beach when the great ape swung down through the trees and stood staring at Nell Evans, who called a happy greeting, then said to Mansey:

"Little Willie has been hurt. Look at that scar on his head."

Circling the ape's skull was a puckered wound, well healed but visible through the reddish-brown hair. But the actions of the animal alarmed Mansey. In a moment Nell Evans was seized in its long arms, held against its great chest, and one paw tried to stroke her fair hair. She screamed with terror, and Mansey leaped forward and was met by a backward-swinging paw that fastened on his throat, squeezing until Mansey's eyes and tongue protruded, then flinging him half-conscious against a tree bole, where he lay recovering his breath and watching something worse than the strangling grip of that huge paw on his neck.

The ape was not vicious with Nell Evans. It held her helpless, its face was close to hers, its lips moved, and soft yet uncouth sounds frighteningly like speech came from deep in its throat in a piteously pleading way as again it tried to stroke her hair. She was too frightened to struggle, but at its crooning and coaxing sounds she closed her eyes, half-fainting. Then the ape got queerly on its knees, pressed her hand to its cheek and gazed at her with pathetic agony in its eyes. Nell tried to regain her control of the animal:

"Good Little Willie. Go and sweep the floor. Go and feed the orchids. Good boy, Willie."

The ape chattered with desperate intensity, then dejectedly let her go and disappeared among the trees. Mansey ran to Mrs. Evans.

"He frightened me. He never acted that way before. I've been away too long. Bill and Dink Forster must be at the surgery, and I must see them."

"Let me go first. The trip is too long and hot for you," he begged, and coaxed her back to the house. He hated to leave her alone there, and as the morning sun smote

quivering heat about the place and she saw the neglected condition of her once pretty home, she consented to go to the schooner and wait.

Mansey set out through stabbing heat and glare for the surgery, staring in amazement as he went at a stretch of scarlet banding the island below the hill where the ape had doubtless dropped the cuttings and they had grown amazingly, blazoning their red trail like blood from wounds, rooting again and again as they crept far and wide towards the sea. Already trees in their paths were dying. He saw a bird try to alight and petal jaws close over it. He saw butterflies engulfed, and as he stood watching he felt a tug at his foot and saw the yellow backs of petals clapped about his boot. As he jerked it away a snake wriggled within reach of one flower that darted at it and caught the luckless serpent by the middle. Its head and tail lashed in the deadly trap. Mansey was already reeling from the lethal emanations of the flowers, and hurried on to where the white building stood, its gate latched.

The ape had scattered red doom that would devour all animal life, smother foliage, denude the island of all living things and leave only sun-baked earth on which lascivious and obscene stems writhed nakedly as pallid serpents among the devouring crests of doom. He was thinking of that when he reached the surgery door and a Chinese met him, then called Forster.

"You here again, Mansey?" he said in evident surprise.

"Mrs. Evans insisted on seeing her husband," said Mansey. "She is waiting on the schooner."

"Nell here! . . . Then keep her on the schooner. Bill isn't able to see anyone yet, though he's recovering nicely."

Something strengthened Mansey's feeling of peril.

"Let me see him, anyway," he said in a voice that carried command, and shoved past Forster.

In a shaded room the sick man lay on a cot, chattering queerly to himself. As the white-robed Chinese attendant came near he grabbed at the hem of his surgical robe and

began pleating it. Mansey's flesh crawled. At sight of him Evans was off the cot bandy-legged, though he had been a man who walked very erect, jumping up and down grotesquely, peering into Mansey's face, chattering horribly like an ape!

An exclamation broke from Mansey and he stared at Forster, who met his gaze with dangerous boldness.

"You knew Evans was a sick man, Mansey. Well, I operated. I arrested his disease awhile. But he isn't the same man he was before, as you can see."

"Yes, I can see. But I can't believe what I see," said Mansey, trying to control an impulse to dash from the place, up-anchor and sail far away and never return. For around the head of the man leaping and prancing at his side was the same sort of puckered wound as that on the head of the ape.

Horror tapped at Mansey's brain. He turned from Evans to Forster, and Evans slyly bolted for the door and was gone, with both Chinese after him. Forster followed, and Mansey overtook him. He was watching Evans' attempt to catch tree branches and swing himself aloft. He fell, uttering queer ape noises, tripped on vines and brush, but managed to elude his pursuers on the trail to the house, where they finally found him lying exhausted on the mat in the kitchen where the ape used to sleep!

Mansey reached the house and was in the kitchen when Forster arrived, but Forster quailed before the outraged emotions glaring from the eyes of Tom Mansey.

"I'm glad Mrs. Evans stayed on my ship," he said. "You've let all hell loose on this island, but your punishment will be certain. I'm leaving here with Mrs. Evans. I'll tell her Bill is dead."

"Oh no, you won't take Nell Evans away," yelled Forster, and the names he called Mansey interested even that port-hardened sea captain. "You had your chance to horn into this affair. I asked you to take me out the first morning I came here and you wouldn't. You knew why I didn't want to stay, damn you. You said as much. Said I'd waited six years. And I had. But Bill Evans

didn't wait. He brought my girl to the ends of the earth and hid her here. He was afraid of me. He thought he wasn't, and he went under the ether for his operation still persuading himself he wasn't afraid of me. But he knew his body was doomed, anyway. But I've prolonged his span of life. He'll have time to realize the hell I've endured thinking of Nell with him. He'll have a chance to know how I felt, separated from her. Only with Nell and me the separation was geographical. With Nell and Bill it's biological!" Forster's laughter began in a wicked chuckle that gathered noise and evil and rose in a gusty frenzy of demoniac triumphant sound.

"Stop it!" yelled Mansey. "You're crazy. You're losing your mind here on this island."

Then he stared as the door opened and out came the body that had been Evans'. A silly grin slit its mouth, its hands carried a tray with bottle and glasses in a slovenly fashion which he rescued from crashing. Then it sat on the porch and plucked at the faded dress belonging to Nell and still hanging there. Mansey gaped as its fingers began to pleat the hem of the dress.

He was so fascinated watching that ape trick of hands that had belonged to a man he liked and respected that he saw nothing as Forster slipped a revolver from his pocket, gripped the nose and swung the butt on Mansey's head. Mansey dropped like a felled ox.

He awakened on a cot in the surgery, bound tightly to the bed from ankles to breast, unable to move hands or feet. Exceeding bright lights illumined the place, though the windows were dark except for low-burning tropic stars. Forster and the two Chinese moved about, clad in their white surgical gowns, faces masked with gauze, fussing with instruments.

Mansey's head throbbed. He tried to turn it, and found it adhering to the cot by dried blood where the gun-butt cracked the skin. Forster came and stood beside the cot.

"Awake now, Mansey? That's good. It's ethical to get the patient's consent before operating."

"Let me out of this. I don't need an operation, though you would if I get my hands on you."

"Brain injured, beyond a doubt." Forster laughed wickedly. His slender fingers were working a hypodermic in a glass of liquid. "But the success we made exchanging the brains of Bill Evans and the ape tempts me to go further. As you know, Mansey, it was Evans' pet theory that surgery would some day make possible the assembling of the best parts of several humans otherwise ready to be junked, and make one workable man. I agree with Bill that it was a noble idea. His body is doomed. I've put his brain in the stalwart chassis of the great ape, or as you sailors call it, Bill's engine occupies another hull. He's out there now, swinging through the trees as his ancient forebears did, and we may come back here some day and see an orang-outang operating on littler monkeys in this well-equipped little surgery. But in the body of Evans, Little Willie is doomed, and he was a well-trained beast. Now your skull-pan is all right, but you must admit you are only a casual type. The world is full of roaming sailors, and you haven't even a wife waiting for you. No one will mind what happens. And I'll prove that Little Willie's brain in your skull will do his tricks and sail a ship as well as you do, so even your company won't know the difference."

Mansey strained at his bonds. He cursed the sneering smile of Forster. The solidly built cot creaked with his writhing.

"Easy now, Mansey, while I give you a shot."

He came with the hypodermic needle. Mansey turned agonized eyes to the window, and then his struggles subsided. In the outer darkness were stars, and lower down against the glass a face looked in at a cot where a Chinese was fitting an ether cone over the face of what had been Bill Evans. Mansey caught the ether fumes as the other Chinese dripped it into the cone. He heard a roar from the ape's throat, and Mansey yelled at the top of his lungs:

"Bill, Bill! Help!"

There was a crash of glass as the ape with the man's brain swung a cudgel on the window, battering it in, scattering broken glass. The two Chinese left their victim and fled screeching to the door. A yell of terror broke from Forster's throat as the huge form of an orang-outang broke into the room and caught him in one hand around his throat while the other ripped the heavy linen bands holding Mansey to the cot.

Mansey's arms were free. The ape creature tossed him a surgical knife, and he was slashing at the remaining bonds, hearing the terrible cries of Forster as the orang-outang lifted him to the operating-table and bound him fast, then caught up a knife.

Mansey fled, hearing the cries of agonized terror from the surgery as he darted into the darkness. Screech after screech of agony filled his ears, and as he passed the window he saw the ape hand wielding a knife that made a shambles of table and floor and the body of Forster. But Mansey was running as he never ran before, making for the wharf, panting for breath. He fell into the small boat on the beach and somehow pulled it to the schooner just as the first streaks of pearl dawn light flowed over the sea.

On deck he wakened the sleeping native crew and gave orders to lift the anchor, and as the ship slowly swung about and made for the reef jaws, he saw coming down the path the hunched and sorrowful figure of the orang-outang. It came to the wharf and looked after his ship with its body a slumping and hopeless travesty of strength and brute force.

Nell Evans was wakened by the clank of anchor chains and came on deck.

"Bill is dead," Mansey said in answer to her startled cry.

He knew Bill Evans would want her to believe he died, and when she turned away in sudden grief and went to her cabin to be alone in that first hour of utter bereavement, Mansey saw the ape wave his hand in a human gesture of farewell, then walk to the end of the narrow

plank wharf and plunge over and down to the coral gardens and waiting tridacna jaws that close at a touch and hold their prey. He knew that the soul of Bill Evans had escaped from the ape's body, just as he knew this island of horror would soon be overgrown with sinister orchids, and presently be a sun-baked lifeless rock, dreary as craters of the moon.

FLIES

ANTHONY VERCOE

FLIES

HERE is the story as I got it from the tramp himself, an ex-university, don I believe, who had come down in the world through some misadventure, and who now lay close to death's door in the workhouse infirmary.

It was sickening weather—a typical English summer. All day long the rain had pattered on the roof-tops and poured in a gurgling stream into the street gutters of the City. The dome of St. Paul's lay enveloped in a great black cloud, and the whole sky to the westward was angry and dark with foreboding.

Towards dusk the rain ceased for a while, and I crept out from the crude shelter of an arch to find some more tempting spot in which to spend the night.

Not that it was cold—far from it! The atmosphere was almost tropically oppressive, and grew worse as still the thunder held off; but I was sick and faint from want of food, and longed with all the fever of despair for a clean soft bed and palatable fare before I finally handed in my checks.

It was while I dragged myself painfully in the direction of High Holborn that I first saw—the house! Would that I had been mercifully obliterated at that moment by some passing lorry rather than live to repeat this tale!

It was a little old-fashioned dwelling, like many that are to be seen in that district—relics of Elizabethan times. It smirked at my misery through its diamond-paned windows, challenging me. A notice was plastered across a sign-board protruding above the portal, bearing the heaven-sent words "To Let." The hour was late, the street practically deserted, and my head seemed to reel under the weight of the unexploded storm. As if to aid me in making up my mind a large splash of rain as big as

a penny fell with a soft plop on to my forehead. It was warm and sticky, like the night outside, and I hesitated no longer. Within that smirking, self-satisfied, wise old house lay refuge from the deluge which threatened.

Cautiously I approached the door. It was locked, of course. I examined the window fastenings of the ground-floor window and cursed my usual bad luck. Then a weakness in the lead round one of the diamonds caught my attention. I glanced quickly to right and left. The policeman at the corner had his back to me. Two couples hurried by. Another quick look—I was unobserved, a tinkle of breaking glass, a thrust of the arm, a turn of the wrist—and the window was open.

Open—and beckoning.

I scrabbled with my hands on the window-ledge and painfully drew myself up. The effort cost me what little strength I had left; but at last I lay exhausted, though triumphant—inside!

I don't know how long I remained there gasping on the floor, my heart hammering in my breast, my temples knocking. It may have been an hour or only a few moments. Perhaps I fainted. Remember, I had had no food for three days! But at last I rose, closed the window again to avoid suspicion, and felt in my pockets for an odd match.

I struck it. Then at what its light revealed I nearly dropped it.

The room was furnished—splendidly furnished in a style three centuries old! A seven-fold candelabra gleamed metallic on the mantle, and I hurriedly applied my wavering match to it that I might see better.

I held my hand over the flame thinking that my weakness was playing tricks with me—but no. It was true! I, a hungry, homeless vagabond, had found sanctuary in a home beyond my wildest dreams. An antiquary's Paradise!

Carrying my candelabra I advanced to the door, then on the threshold I halted. A sudden fear had shaken me. The house I had seen from the outside had looked bare

and empty, and there had been that "To Let" sign to confirm its appearance. This house, on the contrary, was comfortably, even sumptuously, furnished, and it had the *feel* of a house that is lived in! Suppose I had made a mistake!

Suppose in my feeble and overwrought state I had broken into the wrong house? I could expect little mercy at the hands of the occupants. There was a policeman at the corner, and I was virtually a burglar—I realized how tame my excuses would sound as he hauled me off with him to the station.

Prison? Yes, there was always shelter there, but my old pride had always forbidden me to avail myself of it. Pride? I laughed a little mirthlessly remembering my condition—and then I first heard it.

It seemed to come from within my brain—a low-pitched buzzing—and I began to wonder what new trick my failing strength was playing me. The sound droned on, sometimes increasing sometimes decreasing in volume, but never finally abating—like the noise of a distant aeroplane performing gyrations over the house. I shook my head stupidly as I stood by the door, hoping thereby to stop it as one stops the sound of singing in one's ears—but to no avail. The clamour persisted until I felt as though my head was resting against a hive of busy bees.

Then, as this simile occurred to me, I became conscious that the room was growing warmer. I swayed a little and stretched out my hand to the door. It opened easily, and a moment later I stood in the hall. Almost immediately I realized that the buzzing had stopped.

By the light of my candles I marked a little door in the passage which presumably led to the kitchen and staggered towards it—there might food lie! The long flight of oak stairs, trending upwards, I disregarded for fear of waking the householder.

Cautiously I pushed open the little door and stepped through. I was in a kind of parlour and beyond, through another door, I could see the kitchen.

I lifted my candelabra and gazed about me. To my right a second floor showed where the housekeeper slept. I looked to my left and nearly cried out with excitement at what I saw !

Spread on a small oak table was the most delicious repast I could have hoped for. I stumbled towards it, and setting down my light began to eat ravenously. All moral scruples vanished at the sight of food—I was a man, I was starving—surely none would deny me the means to stay those gnawing pangs ?

And then it came again—a low continuous buzzing. But not in my head this time—my head was clear. I set down my glass which I had filled from a beaker with some sweet wine and listened.

The sound seemed to come from the housekeeper's room. I filled my mouth, and, approaching the door, bent my head to the crack.

Buzz—zz—zzz !

Yes, unmistakably it came from within. I put my eye to the keyhole, but the room was in darkness. A queer temptation came to me to trace this sound to its source, and at risk of waking anyone who might be sleeping inside I placed my hand on the knob and cautiously turned it.

Almost immediately the sound of buzzing stopped. Slowly, very slowly, I opened the door and peeped inside. Then I think my heart froze !

Supported across two chairs was a long wooden box whose shape filled me with an unnamable dread. Two three-branch candelabra stood with their fuel guttered out upon the floor, and in a corner of the room was a four-poster bed with tumbled clothes. The lid of the coffin was off.

At first, by my candle-light, I thought that the occupant of the coffin was a negro. Then, as I peered, horror-stricken by my gruesome discovery, that ghastly buzzing recommenced.

It seemed as though a veil was plucked simultaneously from the corpse's face, leaving what had been mercifully

hidden bare in all its festering corruption to my revolted gaze. I stifled a cry and stepped backwards to the door, shutting my eyes to the white baldness of that putrifying thing in the coffin, while I held my breath to withstand the stench that arose from it. Something got in the way of my foot and I stumbled. The door-knob flew out of my hand, and I heard the door slam behind me, then the next instant I was battling frenziedly with the monstrous droning buzzing cloud of blow-flies which had been feasting on the corpse!

Madly I beat at them with my fists, but with little impression. The whole room seemed alive with little hairy legs, with tiny, sticky feet, trying to settle on my skin. And all the time they kept up that hideous buzzing sound as they beat furiously with their wings on the fetid atmosphere. One, larger than the rest to judge by its weight, settled on my lip and sought to insert its leprous body into my mouth. The thought of the thing it had just been feeding off flashed into my mind, nauseating me, and as I struck savagely at it with my bare hand I felt its huge fat body squelch on my cheek and drop.

Somehow I gained the door and opened it. I had dropped my candelabra in my panic, and now, panting and sweating with fear, I half-crawled, half-rolled into the parlour. As I heard the door of the bedroom slam to after me, I breathed a prayer of relief for my escape. There had been something unnatural in the behaviour of those flies, something almost wickedly intelligent in the way they had attacked me. Their assault had had the appearance of being carefully organized by a superior brain—by the mind of some great leader or general.

Deprived of my light I groped in the darkness for the little door which led into the hall. My fingers closed on the knob and turned it. Round and round it went, meeting with no resistance from the lock, while all the time a chill fear crept up my spine paralysing my very thoughts. Something had happened to the catch—the knob was useless. I was locked in!

Madly I shook and rattled at the door-knob. Time and again I flung the pitiful weight of my wasted body against the sturdy oak of that small relentless door, exhausting my newly gained strength in useless effort. Then, when all hope had nearly left me, with a flash of illumination I remembered the kitchen.

"Fool!" I cursed my stupidity as stumbingly I fumbled across the pitch-dark parlour to the kitchen door. Here surely would be a way of escape! I turned and shook my fist in the direction of those half-human flies buzzing maddeningly behind that shut door—that other door—the door of death!

It was my body they wanted—to drink live blood and taste live flesh! I had felt it—known it—there in that room while I had fought them. But I would cheat them yet!

I laughed hysterically as I staggered across the threshold into the kitchen and made my way to the back door. A big window yawned to the right of it, flooding the place with a queer white moonlight. I tried the latch—O Blessed Virgin! it turned, and then—I ceased to laugh. Not a fraction of an inch would the door move either way! I strained and tugged and pulled. At last I felt round the edges of the door, and the mystery stood revealed. Sharp points of nails placed at regular intervals touched my fingers—my exit had been nailed up from the outside!

But why?

Even as I wondered I heard the clanging of a bell somewhere in the street. I peered through the window. Queer how different London looks by moonlight!

I realized I was gazing at a part of the City I had not dreamed existed. The houses opposite seemed almost to invade those on my side of the road, so narrow was the thoroughfare between. Decorative, too, they were—their black beams ornamented here and there with fantastic designs, while their gables lowered menacingly above my head, leaving but a strip of sky.

Clang-a-clang! Clang-a-clang!

Again that bell—nearer this time—and with it I could fancy I heard the scrape and bump of heavy wheels over cobbles. A voice was calling something—a hoarse melancholy voice, but the words eluded me.

Who could be selling things in Holborn at this time of night? But at least he might render me assistance if only I could attract his attention. I clambered on to a table which stood by the window and looked down. Here the street was on a lower level than at the front of the house—to jump would be difficult, even dangerous.

The cart—for cart it was—rolled into view, drawn by a great black horse. A man was leading it, ringing a bell and occasionally shouting his melancholy cry, while behind him on the cart itself another man was sitting queerly silent, his whole attitude indicative of the deepest despair.

There was a lantern on the table beside me, and, finding another match, I lit it, moving it slowly from side to side in front of the window. Soon they would see it—would stop their cart below me—and let me jump to the clean comfort of the open street. Anything rather than stay another moment in the evil silence of this uncanny house.

Ah! He had seen me and was looking up at the window. What was that he was calling? I smiled and nodded, beckoning him nearer.

Now his words came clearer. Was I mad? I knew nothing of the corpse in the other room, yet why did he point up at me like that, why chant that unearthly cry of his: "Bring out your dead! Bring out your dead!"

He pointed to the back of his great ponderous cart. It was full—heaped high with—with what? Shuddering, I saw that the tortuous tangled mass in the back of the cart was human freight, and as a shaft of moonlight fell for an instant across them—that some were not dead—yet!

Scarce understanding even then what it meant I

looked across at the darkened doorways of the houses opposite—and gasped. Each door was marked with a large cross—the cross of despair, the cross of humanity, *the cross of the plague!*

The cart rumbled on and I let it go. I was dazed with the meaning of it all. Had I stepped back through three hundred years when I broke through the window of the house in Holborn? Had I died outside when I lay under that arch in the pouring rain, and could this be my hell? And even while I clasped my tortured head in my hands, I heard again that dread buzzing of the flies.

Fearfully I tiptoed to the kitchen door and held my lantern aloft. The droning from the death chamber swelled louder than a swarm of bees. They were angry at being balked of their prey—the living prey that was so much rarer than the dead!

The atmosphere in the parlour was stifling, and I longed for something to drink. I thought of the wine and food on the table in the corner, then, seeing it, recoiled. Had I really eaten that writhing mass of great white worms? Or had the food putrified during the few minutes I had been out of the room?

Something hummed triumphantly round my head and out of reach. I turned and stared hypnotized at what I saw.

Watching me from its perch on a piece of rotten meat on the table was an enormous fat blow-fly. There seemed to be something malevolent about its very immovability. As I looked it was joined by another and yet another, and now the buzzing became apparent within the parlour itself.

I turned my head and stared at the bedroom door—and then I screamed my fear. From under a crack in the bottom of the door came an endless wriggling stream of fat black bodies as big as nutmegs. One by one they spread their wings and hummed clumsily up on to the table where they settled and fixed me—a motionless dark mass behind the three leaders.

The noise of the buzzing filled the thick atmosphere of the room—and into it crept a new note—a note almost of exultation—of fiendish delight at the way they had outwitted me. They formed up in companies awaiting the signal to charge while I could only stare—held spell-bound by their uncanny discipline.

For a moment there was a complete stillness as the last of them joined the watching army—then in a mass they rose, and the room echoed to the shrill savage beating of their wings.

With a wild yell I dropped the lantern and fled into the kitchen, while all about me the disease-carrying vermin buzzed and whirred, settling on my face, my neck, my ears. I fought them off blindly and leaped on to the table by the window. It was a sixteen foot drop at least down to the street, but I did not hesitate. The plague was in the house—the flies carried the plague, the food I had eaten had been infected—I could feel a lump under my arm and a curious feeling of nausea overcame me.

With my bare arm I smashed the glass of the window, tearing and beating down the leads between the panes like a maniac. Though I had the dread scourge I'd cheat the buzzing pest. They might feast on my carcase, but never whilst I drew breath.

"Bring out your dead!" I cried. "Bring out your dead!"

Then I crashed headlong down into the street below!

Here the tramp left off; and the doctor added his portion to the tale when I met him outside the ward and walked with him to the infirmary door.

"He was picked up in a street off Holborn—run over by a lorry—broken legs. Nearly dead with starvation, poor fellow, and naturally light-headed. Can't get that nonsense he's just told you out of his head!"

But that night at home I found myself wondering if it was "nonsense". There was no sign of a house such as he had described in the particular corner of Holborn which the ambulance driver pointed out to me was the

spot where the tramp was found—but a well-known authority informed me that the road there crosses the site of one of the many plague pits which harbour the bodies of the victims who died as a result of the Great Plague!

LORD OF THE TALKING HEADS

ARTEUR WOODWARD

LORD OF THE TALKING HEADS

THE 'phone rang and the secretary announced that a man was coming up to see me. Such reports are a part of the day's business. Often they are worth while. Sometimes they are the means of acquiring valuable collections or specimens for the museum. At other times they are merely indicative of someone who wishes something identified or requires information on some Indian tribe. All are welcome.

The man who rapped timidly on the door and sidled furtively into the room with a small paper-wrapped parcel in his hand looked to be at least sixty. His hair was white and his face thin, haggard, but singularly free from wrinkles for a man of his age.

"Are you the man in charge of this department?" he asked. Again I was puzzled, for the voice was that of a man in his prime.

"Yes, sir. Won't you be seated?" I responded, motioning to a guest-chair near the desk.

"Are you the one who accepts things for the museum, Indian things and such-like?"

Again I nodded. "Always glad to look at anything. You have something interesting?"

He placed the small parcel on the desk.

"I—I think I have," he faltered. "Mebbe you won't think so, but if you'd care to listen a minute—that is if you have the time, it won't take very long—I'd like to tell you about this—this specimen I want to loan you, if you want it."

Something about the man, his old-youthful look and actions, the air of timidity with which he entered the room, aroused in me a curiosity that I do not usually have for the chance visitor.

"Make yourself at home," I said. "Comfortable? All right, shoot!"

He drew a long breath and eyed me steadily. "I don't look crazy, do I?" he asked quietly.

I laughed at that. He looked the part of a timid, hard-working rancher, but scarcely that of an insane man.

"Well," he continued, settling back in his chair, "I just wanted to know, because what I have to tell you may sound crazy, but I want to say right now that I am as sane as you are, only it's all so damned weird and foolish that sometimes I wonder if I am crazy or not. Do you know who I am?"

"You have the best of me, friend," I answered. "I don't recall having seen you before."

"Well, I work here in the museum," he said. "My name is John Benson."

I thought rapidly, trying to fit this man with some of the attendants who might possibly work in the annex or the preparator's laboratory, places I rarely visited, but could not remember having seen him nor hearing his name.

"I'm the night watchman," he added. "I know you by your name on the door. I make the rounds every night, but you've never seen me. I've been planning on coming to see you for a month, ever since I got the job, but couldn't bring myself to do it, but things have come to such a pass I just had to get rid of it."

"Get rid of what?" I asked.

He pointed to the bundle on the desk. "That. No, wait, don't open it yet. Wait'll I tell you my little yarn; then you can look at it, and if you want it for the museum I'll loan it to you. I can't give it to you, but you can have it for a long-time loan."

"We have papers for what we call indefinite loans," I said.

"That's it, I'll loan it to you indefinitely; you can keep it as long as I live. Keep it in a glass case where I can see it at night when I make my rounds, and I won't have to

think of it being in my room daytimes, while I'm asleep. That's why I want you to have it. I must retain ownership while I'm alive. After I'm dead—well, you can do what you wish with it—keep it, burn it, bury it, anything you like. Now you want the story?"

He was a most unusual man, and his statements were as unusual as his looks and manners, and his words aroused my curiosity as nothing had done for many a moon.

"Well," he began, "two years ago I shipped out of San Francisco for a job with a mining company in Ecuador. I was just twenty-eight then. I am sixty now! Look at my hair! Look at my face! You thought I was an old man, didn't you? No matter, everyone does. That's why I can't get a job as a young man. My looks are against me. That's why I'm a night watchman, working at an old man's job for an old man's pay, by night, and trying to sleep by day. My God! If I don't get some sleep soon I'll be as mad as I sound.

"Well, no matter. Once this is off my chest I'll sleep soundly.

"The job didn't pan out as well as I expected, and being young and ready for anything I fell like a ripe peach for an old yarn of a lost Inca city lousy with gold somewhere in the Oriente country. I heard it from a young Indian in Quito. He seemed to know what he was talking about. Got me all pepped up with the idea, and offered to guide me in. Said he needed a white man to help him.

"We outfitted and started out. I didn't know a thing about the country, or what we needed, left it all to the Indian. I furnished him with all the money I had, and it seemed to me he got an ungodly amount of stuff for just two of us, and when I mentioned it he just grinned and said he knew what we were up against, and would need everything we had before we got back—if we got back. That last crack didn't sound good to me, and I asked him what he meant.

"Then he told me about the Jibaros. To me they might have been a new brand of cigarettes or something

to eat had I heard them mentioned in 'Frisco, but when that brown-skinned devil calmly informed me that they were some of his uncivilized brothers who made it a national pastime to remove people's heads and convert them into household ornaments, cold shivers rippled up my backbone and I began to wish I was anywhere but there. However, there was no backing out then. The Indian had hired some carriers from another tribe to cart our stuff over the mountains and down into the forest land. The whole push decamped the second night after we reached the timber.

" 'Now what?' I asks. 'How are we going to get all this junk into this mess with us, and where is that city of gold?' By this time I was beginning to be fed up with cold nights and hot days, strong winds and poor grub.

" 'We wait, bimeby they come, take us in. Pretty soon everything all *bueno*.'

"That night they did come, twenty or thirty of them, lean, half-naked cusses, all carrying long chonta palm spears tipped with bone points and decorated with plaited basketry and tufts of bright feathers. Nearly every one had a German-made machete thrust through a woven girdle, and five or six of them carried '44 Winchesters.

"They jabbered among themselves, looked at me, grinned, fingered my hair—it was red then—and every minute I expected to see one of their big knives flicker towards my neck or have a spear probing my liver. I didn't like it and told Pepe, my Indian guide, so in danged few words. I was all for going back. He wouldn't hear of it.

" 'We go with them now, see the chief, he expects us,' he said.

"And go we did. At sunset we halted in a clearing where a big house stood, made of posts set on end in the ground and thatched with grass of some sort.

"They motioned us to go in, and once inside I took a good look round and nearly fell over, for there, sitting on a common kitchen chair, sat a huge negro. He was a good six feet tall and husky as a mule. On his head he had a

short stiff stand-up head-dress of purple and red parrot feathers. On his chest was a breastplate of jaguar skin ornamented all over with red and black seeds, bright feathers, stuffed humming-bird skins and shining green beetle wings.

"On his arms were bands of bark painted red and hung with crimson feather tufts. In his ears were huge golden wheels inlaid with turquoise, the first evidence I had seen of any gold in that neck of the woods. A Winchester lay across his lap. When he saw me he grinned like a devil.

"'Git down on yoh knees, white trash,' he rumbled, 'git down on yoh knees and crawl heah and kiss mah feet. Down, yoh heah me?'

"He raised the Winchester and at the same time I felt the point of a spear prod me in the small of the back. Instinctively I glanced over my shoulder and saw Pepe leering at me mockingly.

"What was there to do? A bloodthirsty, traitorous Indian behind me, a mad coon in front of me, ready to blow my guts out. I did what you'd have done, brother: I crawled.

"Well, that was the beginning of six months' hell. It seemed the Big Smoke had deserted from a steamer on the coast and had made his way inland, and was just a bit mad, by his actions. He had set himself up as a sort of god among those Jibaros. He had welded them into a fighting body and ruled them by magic. He claimed he had conjuring powers, and those babies are as superstitious as they make 'em. He had learned of a hidden Inca treasure and helped himself to it. He hated white men, and had lured several parties into the forest, where he delivered them into the hands of the Jibaro warriors. The heads of those unfortunates hung in a dark repulsive cluster round the centre pole of the Big Smoke's house.

"Then he got the Big Idea. He wanted a white slave. He sent Pepe, one of his trusted men, out with the same bait—buried gold. I was the fall guy.

"For six months I was dog-robber to that big burly black man. I had to fan him, I had to wash his feet, I

had to fetch and carry for him, and all the time I schemed to escape.

"He was a cunning devil. He seemed to be able to read my thoughts. When I looked longingly at the trail that led into the forest lands towards the west he'd laugh and prod me in the ribs.

" 'Thinkin' uh leavin' me, wuz yoh? Jus' try it, white trash! Yuh haid will look purty fine up dar among dose fine gemmemun. Yassuh, soon's yoh daid I'm gonna sew yoh soul inside yoh haid and keep yoh to help me lak I does dem other white folks. Yassuh, dyin' won't let yoh go. I keeps yoh atter you-all am daid. Oooee, I got power, I'se got conjure medicine. I holds on to daid men's souls. Look, white trash, see, dey all got dey lips sewed up. Dey can't escape. Dey helps me.'

"He was mad. No doubt about it. But didn't those Jibaros eat it up! They believed implicitly in what he said, and every head they took they shrunk to the size of an orange, using hot sand and rocks in the curing process. Then they held a nine-day ceremony, during which time the head-takers danced with those damned grisly things flopping on their chests. At first they just stuck little chonta palm splinters in the lips, and later ran long cotton cords through the holes, sewing the lips tightly together.

"I attended many of those ceremonies during the time I was with them. I had to. In that way I learned just how to do it—how long the fresh skin should be boiled in the preliminary shrinking, and how to mould the features as the skin gradually dried, how to sew the cut at the back of the neck where they slit the skin in order to peel the hide from the head, and how to do the delicate skinning work required to remove the skin from around the nose and eyes.

"One day they brought in the head of a kid about fourteen or fifteen, a *mestizo*, a half-breed.

" 'Now white trash, I show yoh how I keeps de soul,' leered the Big Smoke when the head was properly cured. 'I done got dis young-un's spirit cooped up, an' to show

yoh how easy it is I'se gonna take de splinters outen de lips an' leave 'em out so's yoh can heah it talk to me. Hit's too young to bodder me. Hit's too scairt o' me to do anythin' but obey. Watch and lissen !

"I'll never forget that night as long as I live. Big Smoke took that gruesome wizened head and swung it by the head-cord, which was fastened to the top of the scalp, on the centre pole. Then he sat down on his chair facing it, and closed his eyes. The hut was full of Jibaros, stinking of sweat and grease ; the fire had some cussed stuff on it that gave off a sickish smell, and a grey silvery smoke that made the air foggy.

" 'Lissen, yoh spirit-boy, lissen an' answer me. I'se tellin' yoh what I wants yoh to do. Tell me, whut does it look lak, dat house way up yander on de mountain, de last one jest before de trail dips down de hills into de trees ? Tell me so's I can heah.'

"I leaned forward, watching the head. This was just mummary, I knew, but I had to watch that head.

"I knew the house to which the Big Smoke referred. It was the last sign of civilization we had passed, one hundred and fifty miles to the west, a small stone hut with tiled roof, unlike the wooden, thatched dwellings of the Jibaro country.

"Then my hair began to crawl on the nape of my neck. I felt cold sweat begin to ooze from my pores. I froze in my tracks.

"*That dried head began to speak !* From the tiny open mouth issued a thin trembling voice speaking in Spanish.

"*'La casita es de piedra blanca. Hay dos ventanas. Yo veo un hombre en la puerta, es un soldado. . . .'*

"The head was swaying back and forth, back and forth, and about that time I lost my grip on things and passed out.

"When I came to the hut was empty of Indians. The head on the post was trembling almost imperceptibly, and the Big Smoke was looking down at me, a mocking sneer on his ebony face.

" 'Theah, yoh see, white trash ? I'se voodoo. Now yoh is mah slave foh life—an' in death.'

"That night I sneaked into the hut and ripped the mouth cords out of *every white man's head* that hung on the central post !

"Mad ? Perhaps I was, but I had been shown my way out. The Big Smoke feared those spirits. He controlled them only so long as he could keep their souls in their heads. The soul must escape through the mouth.

"Then I ran from the hut and hid in the darkness outside. Suddenly I heard a fearful, blood-curdling cry and the sound of a huge body lurching around inside the house. Then a black hulk stumbled through the doorway and loomed for a moment against the stars. I heard hoarse bubbling gasps, and an instant later the Big Smoke crashed full length in the path, his feet drumming a tattoo on the beaten earth.

"A moment later I heard the sound of laughter, excited happy laughter, and a babble of men's voices dwindling in the distance.

"All the rest of that long night I lay there in the bush scarcely daring to breathe, and not a lance-length from me sprawled the silent corpse of the Big Smoke.

"When the morning broke I stole over to the body and looked at it. The face was screwed into a terror-stricken mask, the yellow-white of the eyeballs stood out hideously, the mouth gaped open and the tongue was thick and swollen, and on the black throat were the thin welts of many fingers—fingers that were bonelike in their thinness.

"It was a pleasure to prepare that head. I removed it and stole away into the forest. By that time I was an adept at getting round in the undergrowth. I cured the head as I had seen it done dozens of times, and I was very careful to sew the lips tightly together.

"Then I escaped. I had the golden ear-plugs which the Big Smoke had worn in his ears. I had other gold in a leather pouch, along with extra ammunition for the Big Smoke's '44.

"Finally I won out to the coast and managed to ship home. My hair has been like this since that awful night when the Big Smoke passed out.

"Everything was all right. I was home, and if it wasn't for the kinky-haired doll head I kept on the shelf in my room, which all my friends took for a new kind of Woolworth souvenir, I'd have said it was just a bad dream.

"Then one night I awakened to hear a gasping gurgle close to my ear. It was the mumble of the Big Smoke.

"*'Jest a little moah! Jest a little moah! One moah string and I'se free. Then I git yoh, white trash!'*

"I switched on the light and looked at the head. All save one of the cotton cords that held the lips together had parted from dampness and action of a mouse which had gnawed away while I slept.

"It didn't take me long to put new cords in place, I can tell you, but every night now for the last few weeks I have worked here, and I don't have to face the danger of the night, but I can't sleep in the daytime for fear the Big Smoke will get loose. So I want you to take him, put him in a tight glass case where moths or mice can't get at him, and where I can flash my light on him as I make my rounds, and the attendants can watch him during the day. Then I'll sleep. Will you do this for me?

As he ceased he fumbled with the cord of the parcel and opened the paper.

There lay the shrunken head of a negro, tiny, repellent.

The tiny eye-slits were closed tightly, the hair curled in a tight kinky mass on the bullet-shaped head, and on the face was a look of horror, perceptible even in the diminutive features which apparently had been carefully moulded to represent the living man. Looking closer I saw that the lobe of each ear was slit and distended. The lips were sewed together with new white cotton cord.

I looked at Benson. He was watching me intently, appealingly.

"Well?"

"Why, of course, we'll be glad to take care of it for you," I said cheerfully, as though I had not listened to as

wild a tale as a man ever heard. Privately I thought him the biggest liar I had ever listened to, but he did have a shrunk head, and those grisly things do attract the public. "Only," I continued, "I'll have to wait a day or two before I can find a case for it. In the meantime I'll turn it over to the custodian to place in a fumigating-vat."

"You're sure it'll be safe there? Mice can't get at it? My God, man, can't you realize what it would mean to me if those lips should become unsealed? Suppose I felt those damned black paws at my throat as I travelled down one of the dark corridors. Suppose *he* got loose and hit out in this building. Can't you imagine the horror of it?"

"Well, mice can't live in fumigating-vats, and, besides, I imagine he'd feel lost in this building if he did get loose."

Benson looked at me fearfully.

"You don't know what you're saying. Oh, I know you think I'm crazy as a loon, but for God's sake take care of that head! Now I'm going home to enjoy the first good sleep I've had in weeks."

After he had gone I sat for some time looking at the gruesome, wizened trophy. It was genuine, all right. We have had reports that some cunning Chinamen in Panama have been making bootleg heads taken from paupers' bodies, but they sew the neck slit with ordinary cord instead of a bit of fibre from a vine. This head was sewed in the orthodox manner. As for the soul part of it . . . bosh, the man was just a bit daffy. I've had visitors of his calibre before. There was the little old lady who was so gentle and calm but she went off raving in two minutes, telling me about the disembodied spirit named Harvey who kept invisible watch on her and whispered vile things in her ear as she took the air on top of a Fifth Avenue bus. Benson had been too much alone. He walked at night down the dim corridors alive with the memories of by-gone days, and perhaps he had been a prisoner in the Jibaro country, and the sights he had seen were now crystallizing in an all too vivid form.

I turned the head over to the custodian and forgot it for the moment. I really intended to put it on exhibition the same afternoon, after it had been in the fumigating-vat, but other matters came up and I forgot the cursed thing.

Two days after this interview Benson came to see me again, and I resigned myself to another long tale of hair-raising horrors, but he surprised me by his brevity.

"You haven't put the head on exhibition yet, I notice," he said, after the first greetings were over. "Would you mind telling me where it is? I—I—don't feel easy unless I can keep it where I can see it."

"By Jove, no, I haven't," I said. "The custodian took it to the fumigating-vat and I completely forgot it. Glad you reminded me of it. I'll get it immediately."

I went to the 'phone and rang the front office and asked for the custodian.

"It is his day off, and he won't be in until to-morrow morning," the secretary told me.

"Well, it looks as though we'll have to wait until to-morrow, Benson. Dickson, the custodian, is off for the day, and he has the key to the fumigating-vat. I'll make a memorandum and have that head out first thing in the morning."

He appeared somewhat relieved, but a trace of anxiety still lingered in his face.

"It'll be in a case by to-morrow, sure?" he pressed.

"Word of honour," I assured him.

He thanked me and went out.

The next morning the head was on my mind, and I fully intended asking Dickson to open the case and get the head for me, but an excited group in front of the unfinished gorilla group in the African hall drove the good intention into thin air.

"What's up?" I asked of the electrician who stood on the fringe of the knot of employees.

"Plenty," he answered solemnly. "We got a dead man here, and we're waiting for the coroner."

"Dead man!" I echoed. "Who is it?"

"Night watchman, a new man; someone says his name is Benson. Must have had a fit or something. He looks terrible."

I pushed through the group and bent over the body of a man sprawled in a grotesque heap at the feet of one of the huge mounted simians that loomed over the dead body like an ungainly sinister thing, a setting in that dim gloomy hall fit to be the climax of a movie thriller.

It was Benson. He had fallen on his back. His flashlight was clutched tightly in his right hand, and the time-clock, glass shattered for all of its protective covering, lay at the feet of the gorilla. I looked at the clock. It had stopped at ten minutes past twelve.

Someone had thrown a piece of canvas over the face of the corpse. I lifted the fabric and stared at the features of the man who had been in my office the day before. In truth the man must have died of some sudden seizure. The eyeballs protruded, the tongue showed thick and swollen through blackened lips. I bent closer . . . merciful God, *the throat*. . . .

I whirled and dashed for the door.

"Dickson! Get Dickson!" I shouted.

He came on the run.

"For heaven's sake, man," he gasped, "what on earth is the matter with you?"

"The key, man, the key! Open the fumigating-vat immediately!" I said, and I trembled in spite of myself.

"It's empty," he answered. "Oh, by gosh, I intended telling you something! You know that head——"

"Yes, that's it, the head, what did you do with it? Where is it? Quick, tell me, *where is that head?*" I seized him by the shoulders and shook him. I felt that I must be going mad.

Dickson gaped at me.

"You crazy?" he asked, wrenching away from me. "Keep your shirt on and I'll tell you. I intended doing it before I left, but it slipped my mind—didn't amount to anything, but I thought I ought to mention it——"

"Out with it! Quick, for the love of heaven, Dickson—where have you put that head? I've got to know," I snapped.

"Well, when you brought it in to me I started to take it downstairs, and by accident the strings dangling from the lips caught on the door and yanked loose. I thought I'd better mend it and took it back to my desk, but someone called me away just then and I forgot all about it. That's all there is to it. The head is on my desk now. Satisfied?"

For a moment I thought I was going to keel over. Strings pulled out . . . head on desk. Lips unsealed . . . and there in the gloom of the African hall lay all that was mortal of Benson with a set of cruel deep welts on his throat. . . .

It was broad daylight, but I swear to this day that I heard far off a throaty, terrible chuckle, receding into the distance, and a voice that chilled me to the bone jeeringly say:

"Crawl, white trash. Ah holds yoh now foh good! Git down an' crawl!"

A mad, terrible voice.

But Dickson couldn't hear it, and now they say I'm a bit cracked because I wired the lips of a shrunken head shut with heavy copper wire, and keep it in a sealed case.

They don't know what Benson knew and what I know.

HELVELLYN
ELIVILION OR HILL OF BAAL
ROSALIE MUSPRATT

HELVELLYN

It was a bright spring day ; white fleecy clouds scudded across a bright blue sky. The Mountain Helvellyn looked like a dim brooding shadow, watching with scorn the destinies of men. Its summit was wreathed in silver mist, which was wrapt about it like a gossamer garment. Here and there the rugged sides of the mountain pierced through showing an ugly strength, like a menace through the fairy veil.

Down in Patterdale the earth was stirring from its long sleep, and the trees showed young green. Small lambs gambolled in the meadows, then fled bleating to their mother's side.

Campbell Martin sat by the way which led upwards to Grisedale Tarn. It was spring, and it made him restless ; he wanted to wander. But he did not know if the ascent was very toilsome and how long it would take.

Just then another traveller came along the dusty road. He was dressed in rusty black, wore a Homburg hat and in his hand carried a gladstone bag. His whole attire spoke of gentility, and the thick glasses which shrouded his eyes left no doubt as to his respectability. Confidential clerk or office worker the other classed him.

The stranger's clothing and general air of gloom seemed but ill in keeping with the brightness of the day. A certain grimness seemed to radiate from his personality.

He advanced along the road with the air of one who knows where he is going and has an object in view. But to Campbell's surprise, when he came to the way that led to Grisedale Tarn he turned aside. There was something about his action which was almost uncanny. He was so suited to the main road, and in the other's opinion should have continued along it until he came to the nearest

town. Instead of which he was striking off into the open country up a mountain-side.

Campbell recovered himself before he had gone far and shouted after him, to ask how far it was to Grisedale Tarn ; as he wanted to go that way.

The stranger raised his head in a startled way, as one who is caught in the act of doing something he knows is wrong. He glanced about him in a nervous manner ; then, seeing Campbell was alone, he smiled sardonically and retraced his footsteps.

He did not attempt to reply until they stood face to face. Then he regarded Campbell with a severe frown so that the heavy brows met over a thin nose.

"I am going there myself," he said in a monotonous voice as if he were used to chanting. "You may come too. I came across some writings very old and very rare. They were about Helvellyn, and I wish to make some observations with regard to the Druid theory. They had human sacrifices there, you know !"

He paused and continued with a strange laugh :

"To-night is one of their great festivals, but we will not be there to-night. Are you afraid ?"

"Why, of course not," answered the other. "I am glad to find someone who knows the way, and we shall, I suppose, be back before dusk ?"

"It is not safe on the mountain-side after dark ; strange things happen," the stranger replied. Then, still in his queer monotonous voice, went on, "My name is Jones. You can trust me as a guide. I know every stick and stone of the way. Helvellyn is my friend. I love the mountain. I feel its slopes are home, and we are in touch with each other. But you would not understand what I mean. Come along, young man !"

So they started that journey up the hill of Baal, a way fraught with terror.

Jones went first, and he walked with long swinging strides and head bent like a hound on the trail. As he went he talked.

"I have known this mountain," he said, "in every

mood. When the sun shines on the slopes and the brown earth is warm and kind. When the birds sing and the way is soft to the feet. Then I have known it too when the wind swirls about its sides and drives clouds of sleet in the traveller's face. When brambles reach out long thorny fingers to hold him back, and nettles sting the intruder.

"When the only birds are hawks or crows, and the earth itself is hard as iron, and the rain coming down courses over its surface like a river. Then Helvellyn is a place to avoid and it is better to turn back.

"But to-day it is in a welcoming mood. If it could speak it would tell of strange things. The old Druid days when the stones were red with blood."

Then he started telling histories of the services that were held there, of the awful rites that had taken place. His words left unpleasant thoughts behind.

Campbell shivered and plodded on in silence. He had, of course, heard of the Druids, but never realized the orgies at which they worshipped. If he had thought of them, it was in a vague way as far-off dreamlike figures that had perhaps existed a long time ago. But to the little man in black they were actual facts; as if he had known them. He was certain that their spirits and that of elementals wandered abroad on Helvellyn after dark. Also their powers were by no means exhausted.

So absorbed was Campbell in the sad recitations of the other that he did not notice how long they journeyed, and that he was tired and his clothes were torn. But when the voice in front stopped quite abruptly he became aware of all these things.

He glanced upwards, and the sky was very dark and overcast. A cold wind blew across the bare ground and great drops of rain began to fall.

"Hadn't we better go back?" he said to Jones.

"No," the other answered tersely. "It is not far now."

So they plodded on in silence with the rain driving in their faces.

"I can't go any farther," said Campbell at last, wet and weary. "I must go back !"

"I go on," said Jones without emotion.

"But," expostulated his companion, "it is cold and wet and dangerously slippery. We are on the edge of a steep drop. If we missed our footing we might be killed. I must go back !"

"Very well, you can return alone," said the other. "The rain is stopping and a mountain mist will rise, so you might go over Striding Edge. Many lives have been lost there, but what are they to Helvellyn. But you may go ; it is just as you please !"

As he spoke the rain ceased, and a mist seemed to come from the ground like smoke. It was a thick yellow mist ; it rose with startling suddenness, as if in answer to the other's words. It seemed as if Helvellyn knew and loved his voice and was ready to help him.

They were both up to the waist in the horrible yellow vapour. Campbell looked at the ground—he could see nothing. But he remembered to the right a drop !

The evil vapour was moving slowly, it came higher and higher. Enthralled, he watched it until it was up to the neck of Jones. There he stood, but only his face showed out of the mist. To Campbell it seemed almost like smoke from hell, and as if the white leering face was detached from the body, like the evil genii of the Arabian Nights whose face materialized out of unholy smoke.

The fog rolled higher, and now the form of Jones was completely hidden, but he showed dimly through the mist, a thin, wavering shadow.

Campbell felt a spirit of utter helplessness overwhelm him. There were powers abroad over which he had no control. The mist had made it impossible to go back and betrayed him to the man of evil, Helvellyn's priest ! The man with the gladstone bag !

"Take my hand !" said Jones, and he reached out of the mist a thin hand. Campbell hesitated, then touched the bony fingers which were holding on to his coat. The other's fingers entwined among his own ; he was conscious

of a change. He heard a strange whispering in the air, a humming sound, as if there were many things hidden in the mist. Not human things, but things out of the earth!

There were mutterings, and he felt about him moving forms. He could not see them, but was sure their eyes were fastened upon him. Overwhelmed with fear he sank to his knees, but it was too late. Somewhere in the yellow vapour something laughed.

"Get up," said Jones, and the other did so. Then they went on again. It was impossible to see, but the man with the gladstone bag never made a false step, never hesitated.

It was an eerie journey. Campbell never saw his guide except as a wavering shadow. Only that evil hand holding his led him on—on. He longed to drop it, but he remembered the words, "Many lives have been lost on Helvellyn!" and only the love-sick wanted to die.

It was icy, and his clothes were soaked through. Campbell shivered from cold and exhaustion. He opened his mouth to speak, but the thick yellow mist choked him. Like some essence of evil it stole inside and pervaded his whole being. Filled his lungs, made his heart beat until he thought it would burst.

Then the realization came to him that he was hurrying along in a crowd. They were all going somewhere to something. Occasionally they touched him and the shock of it made him shiver.

He asked the man with the gladstone bag to explain, but he never answered. At times it seemed as if the hand holding his had become separated from the body; that there was just the hand out of the mist, utterly detached from anything else.

Campbell knew that the throng about him were bent on evil, but what their mission was he did not know. So that was why Jones had talked about the Druids. Was he, perhaps, possessed of an elemental and not responsible for his actions?

At last they stopped and a voice said, "Sit down! There is a stone at your feet." Campbell dropped the evil hand and fell on his knees, feeling the ground. His

fingers touched a flat smooth stone. It was very cold and like a slab of marble. Exhausted, he sank upon it. All round about were voices muttering, and things were touching him.

Something soft jumped on to his hand ; it was a toad. With a scream he flung it from him. Then it flashed upon him it was the sacrificial stone on which he sat. He crouched in abject terror, with his hands over his ears. Time passed slowly. The forms were still there and so was Jones. He could not see him, but he felt his presence.

Some time passed, during which all powers of action seemed to have left him and he was just resigned to Fate. Then once again the hand touched his. "Get up," said Jones. Campbell rose to his feet shivering in every limb and his teeth chattering. Jones was talking with various forms which wafted about in the mist. Evil spirits were closing about him, and a weird chanting rose upon the air.

Then they started to walk downhill. The hand tugged at him to go faster, faster. As if the man Jones was impatient to reach some goal.

Then Campbell's feet stepped into water—a puddle, he thought. But they went on and the water rose higher and higher, until it was up to their knees. Then fear of death came upon him ; he dropped the hand and rushed madly back.

As he reached the firm ground the mist rose like a solid curtain and the moon shone out. By its light he saw they were on the edge of a tarn. Out in the dark waters was Jones, still moving but immersed to the waist. Campbell shouted to him, but the mountain echoed his voice ; no sound came from Jones. He went on, the water was up to his neck. What was the man doing ? He went on without a sound, the waters closed over his head. Campbell stood on the bank transfixed and dumb. The man had drowned himself. Then he understood. He wanted him to go to his death too. That was Jones' plan.

Fear overcame him. Madly he rushed up the slope

away from that evil spot. He ran until he was exhausted, then crept on into a niche in the rock and tried to get some warmth into his numb body. There he lay until morning dawned over Helvellyn in clear grey light.

It was half past twelve when Campbell came into a little lakeland village. He knocked at the door of the first cottage. The woman who opened the door readily granted his request for food. Seated before a blazing fire he warmed himself and told the man and his wife the story of that awful night.

The old man listened in silence, then he rose, walked to the window and pulled the curtain aside.

"Out there," he said, "is the churchyard. One day two years ago there came a stranger up the road to Grisedale Tarn. He was a respectable-looking man dressed in black. It was about this very date. Several people saw him in this way.

"Next day his body was found in Grisedale Tarn. None knew his name or where he came from. But his body lies out there in unhallowed ground, outside the churchyard."

THE HOUSE OF THE LIVING DEAD

HAROLD WARD

THE HOUSE OF THE LIVING DEAD

L. JOHN HARPER

"LIVING corpses ! Men and women filched from the grave, festering in their mouldering cerements, talking, laughing dancing, breathing, holding hellish jubilee ! All this have I seen—more. Yet who will believe me—I who am an inmate of the House of the Living Dead ? Even as I pen this screed I look down and see the rotting cloth dropping from my mildewed framework with every move and feel the maggots bore their tortuous way through my decaying carcas. Ugh ! Even I, living dead man that I am, inured to the horror of it all, shudder as I write.

"I am helpless. Would that I had the power to free myself from the foul grasp of Lessman, the master of us all ! Across the room lies the body of Carter Cope. Soon, but not until Lessman commands, I will return to occupy it. My body belongs to him—to Doctor Lessman. But my soul is my own, even though Lessman holds it in his clutches. For the soul does not die. Ah, a wonderful man is Darius Lessman—able as he is to throw off his temporal body and assume that of another. He is a superman—or a devil. I——"

Asa Rider, private investigator, laid the manuscript on the table before him with a snort of disgust.

"What twaddle is this ?" he demanded angrily. "My time is too valuable, Mr. Harper, to devote to such drivel. It is nothing but the maniacal gibberings of a diseased brain. I——"

His visitor stopped him with a little gesture.

"But is it ?" he questioned gravely. "Do I look like the sort of man to be stampeded ? As I told you at the commencement of our interview, I am an attorney of twenty-

five years' standing. I know Carter Cope. Only a few months ago he was in my office. He came in response to my request. I, as attorney for Priestly Ogden, retained him to institute a search for that unfortunate young man. I can honestly say that he is no more insane than you are. He disappeared that night. His car was found, a battered pile of junk, in an abandoned stone quarry many miles north of here. His body has never been found.

"I never believed that he was dead. Then yesterday this weird manuscript reached me by mail. It was in a sealed envelope placed within another envelope, both addressed to me. With it was a brief note from a man who signs himself Fred Rolfe, stating that he had picked it up alongside the road close to Oakwood cemetery. The handwriting, both in the body of the manuscript and on the envelope, is that of Carter Cope.

"Briefly, sir, I believe that Carter Cope is the victim of some terrible misfortune. Possibly, as you have suggested, it may be mental. But, at any rate, he still lives. I want you to seek him out and save him from this—this thing, whatever it is. I sent Carter Cope into it, just as I am seeking to send you. I feel a moral responsibility, and John Harper is not the man to shirk his responsibilities. My private fortune—and I am not a poor man by any means—is at your command. Incidentally, in seeking him, you may run across a clue to the whereabouts of Priestly Ogden. I ask you this favour, Mr. Rider—read the manuscript to the end. Diagnose it with an open mind. Having finished it, if you do not care to accept the commission I will seek some other detective. Otherwise——"

"Why did you come to me?" Rider interrupted bluntly. "I am a stranger to you. My reputation is not so great that you would seek me out without some good reason."

John Harper shrugged his shoulders.

"Perhaps you are not unknown to me," he responded quickly. "And I know you to be a single man, your closest relative a distant cousin. I am sending you into danger. And, frankly, you will not be greatly missed should you meet the same fate that seems to have overtaken Carter

Cope and Priestly Ogden. I say with equal frankness that I doubt whether you will come out of the affair alive. I have a feeling—call it a hunch, if you choose—to that effect. The man who accepts my commission cannot be a coward.”

“Your talk of danger intrigues me,” Rider said hotly. “Leave the manuscript here. Let me read it through. I will give you my answer in the morning.”

John Harper rose to his feet.

“I will be at the Lincoln Tavern until noon to-morrow,” he responded, extending his hand. “I will expect an acceptance by that time or the return of the manuscript. Meanwhile”—his hand moved towards his pocket—“what about a retaining fee? It is customary, I believe.”

Rider shook his head.

“Should I accept your commission I will render my bill when I have finished my work,” he answered. “And I warn you in advance, Mr. Harper, that it will not be a small one.”

“Bring me the solution of the puzzle and there will be no quibbling over your fee,” Harper asserted. “I want to know the truth regardless of the cost.”

He moved towards the door. Even before it closed behind him Rider knew that he would accept the lawyer's tender. He filled and lighted his briar and gathered together the sheaf of papers. They were in pencil, somewhat in the form of a diary, although undated. With them was a clipping from some newspaper, it, like the manuscript, being without date.

They are given here verbatim :

II. THE STRANGE STORY OF CARTER COPE

I am writing this in the House of the Living Dead. I know it by no other name. Perhaps, some time, someone will find this manuscript and explain my strange fate to the world. Now . . .

But I digress. Let me start at the beginning, hard though it is to tell the story.

There was something sinister and forboding about the rambling old place that caused me to shudder in spite of myself. On either side was a clump of evergreen through which each breath of vagrant wind soughed and moaned like a lost soul in Purgatory. A scant hundred yards away to the right was a tiny vine-covered ruin of a church, its spire rotting and drooping, its windows broken. Surrounding it was a tangle of underbrush and weeds, through which I caught a glimpse of sunken graves and fallen tombstones.

The house was a huge pile of brick and stone and wood. It sprawled against the side of the little hill like some squat ungainly monster in the midst of a fetid jungle. The weed-grown burying-ground extended through the evergreens almost to the flagstone path which wound, twisting and snakelike, through the mass of creepers and lilac bushes and stunted arbor vitæ trees with which the front yard was filled. There was something eerie and unreal about the place—something that gave me a feeling that if I investigated closer I would find a layer of fungus over everything.

Surrounding the unsightly ensemble was a high iron fence, the pickets sharpened at the top.

I swung open the creaking gate and entered, only to leap back with an exclamation of fright as the head and shoulders of a man suddenly appeared out of a little clump of bushes. He was a huge lump of a fellow, loutish and uncouth; his beard black and tangled, the hair—which hung low over his retreating forehead—long and matted and filled with sand burs. For an instant he gazed at me, an idiotic grin on his doughlike face, while I stared blankly back. Then I recovered myself and plunged into speech.

"I am looking for Doctor Darius Lessman," I informed him civilly. "Does he live here?"

The man made neither sound nor comment. Not a gleam of comprehension flitted over his ox-like face. I repeated the question again. For what seemed ages he stood there gazing dumbly at me. Then, with a queer,

gurgling, throaty sound he turned and disappeared back into the tangle of underbush.

I was tempted to turn and retreat to my car, which stood beside the road a dozen rods away. Again the boding of disaster swept over me. In spite of the fact that the day had been hot and sultry, I felt the chills chase themselves up and down my spinal column. Would to God I had yielded to that feeling and left the accursed place then and there. Instead, cursing myself for a fool, I squared my shoulders and continued my way up the stone-paved path.

The door before which I found myself was of nail-studded oak, blackened with age and flanked on either side by narrow panes of dark-coloured glass. There was no sign of bell or knocker. Doubling my fist, I pounded a lusty tattoo.

There was no answer. I rapped again, cursing under my breath. I had a feeling that there was somebody on the other side of the panels, although I heard nothing. I raised my knuckles to rap again, when the door opened a tiny crack and an eye peered out at me. I opened my mouth to speak, when the eye was suddenly withdrawn. A chain rattled. Then the door was slowly opened and I found myself staring into the face of a young woman attired in the conventional garb of a nurse.

"Pardon the delay in answering your summons," she said in a rich throaty contralto. "In a place like this we, naturally, are forced to be careful."

She waited for me to answer. She was tall—taller than the average—and dark, with the clear white skin of the Eurasian. Her hair was drawn back under her pert little cap, it was as black as the darkness of a moonless night, while the eyes which gazed inquiringly into mine were as deep as limpid pools.

"Doctor Lessman?" I managed to articulate.

"What is your business with him?" she demanded pleasantly, although firmly. "Doctor Lessman, as you no doubt are aware, is a very busy man. I am his secretary."

I nodded and presented my credentials.

"Carter Cope," she said, gazing down at the card in the

leather-covered case I held in front of her eyes. "You are a detective?"

"In search of a young man named Priestly Ogden," I hastened to explain. "I have been retained by his relatives—or, rather, by his lawyer for them."

"And where does Doctor Lessman fit into the picture?" she inquired.

"I hardly know myself," I smiled back at her. "The fact is, that in searching through the young man's effects I chanced upon a scrap of paper on which the doctor's name was written. Investigation showed that he is licensed to operate a sanatorium for the treatment of mental disorders. Resolved to run down every possible clue, I came here in the hope that some quirk in the young man's brain prompted him to place himself under the doctor's care in the belief that he was temporarily deranged."

She nodded her comprehension.

"I can recall no patient by that name," she said thoughtfully. "However, it would be best for you to talk to the doctor. Step into the office, please, and I will call him."

The room in which I found myself was out of keeping with the gloomy exterior of the house. It was gorgeously furnished, with its columns of lapis-lazuli, the great fireplace across the end of onyx and marble. The walls were panelled and covered with silken curtains; the rugs were Persian and almost priceless. Here and there hung rare paintings; scattered about were exquisite marbles in keeping with the remainder of the great room.

I dropped into a large Louis XV chair and looked about me.

"Doctor Lessman is busy just now," the girl informed me as she glided into the room. "I have informed him of your presence, however, and he will be with you inside of a few minutes."

She left the room again, closing the door behind her. I heard the click of a bolt and knew that I had been locked inside. My dealings with hospitals for the insane had been negligible, however, and I solaced myself with

the thought that this, perhaps, was the customary procedure in places such as this.

For a moment I busied myself in making a mental survey of the room and its treasures. The thought suddenly flashed through my mind that, even though the sun was shining brightly outside, the place was artificially lighted. I glanced towards the windows. What I discovered there gave me a start.

The rich tapestry curtains covered thick steel shutters, tightly padlocked.

"You wish to see me, sir?"

I woke from my reverie. The man who stood before me was tall and thin almost to the point of emaciation. He was clad in a surgeon's white smock, his coal-black hair brushed straight back. His nose was thin and hooked slightly, his dark beard trimmed to a needle-point. It was his eyes, however, which attracted me most. They were black and beady, deeply sunken in their sockets and thatched by heavy brows, giving his countenance an appearance at once saturnine and satanic.

I leaped to my feet with an apology.

"You are Doctor Lessman?"

He nodded. Then:

"My secretary tells me that you are seeking a young man—Ogden, I believe she said the name was?"

While he was speaking he motioned me back to my chair, at the same time seating himself on the opposite side of the table. From one of the drawers he drew forth a sack of smoking-tobacco and a book of papers, and taking a leaf therefrom deftly rolled himself a cigarette.

"Smoke?" he inquired, pushing a humidor of cigars across to me.

I nodded and accepted one of the weeds. He waited until I had lighted it, then plunged into a mass of questions which almost left me breathless with the answering. The man was a brilliant talker, examining me so deftly that inside of five minutes he had milked me dry in spite of myself, learning almost as much of my past life as I knew myself.

"A bachelor, eh?" he said reflectively. "Quite the thing, I would imagine, for one whose occupation is as dangerous as yours. Criminology has always been a hobby of mine; I regret that I have not had the time to study it more. Take the present instance—psychologically, I mean, I would like to know what reasoning led you to believe that your man, Ogden, was here?"

We are all more or less susceptible to flattery. I am no different from the average man. I told him of my search for the missing young man and the finding of the slip of paper among his effects with Lessman's name written on it.

"It was my belief," I said, taking the bit of paper from my pocket and passing it across the table to the physician, "that the young man might be suffering from a belief that he was ill mentally, and that he had, therefore, placed himself under your care."

Lessman slowly shook his head as he examined the paper I had handed to him.

"Not my writing," he said. Then: "In other words, Mr. Cope, your visit here is merely one of the thousand little details connected with your profession?"

I nodded. "By running down each tiny clue we eventually hit upon something which leads us to the solution of the puzzle we are working on," I answered somewhat grandiloquently.

"Your man, Watson?" he inquired, with a twinkle in his deep-set eyes. "I presume you have one—some admirer who takes notes of your triumphs and mistakes in the hope of some day handing your exploits down to posterity?"

I shook my head. "I work entirely alone," I replied. "My trip here will, like thousands of my other mistakes, never be chronicled, for the simple reason that no one will ever know of it. No one knows that I am here, and I am not fool enough to tell of my blunder. It is only my successes that I report."

I realized too late that my answer was what he had been seeking for. His face changed. The look of dignity

was wiped out in an instant, and in its place came a peculiarly evil stare.

I started to leap to my feet. Something held me in my chair as in a vice. What was it? I do not know. Nor do I understand it to this day. I struggled against it with all the power at my command, but in vain. I tried to talk. My tongue clove to the roof of my mouth. My head was clear as a bell. I could think and reason, but I could not co-ordinate my muscles. I was paralysed.

Lessman bent over me for an instant. Then he stepped across the floor and opened the door.

"Meta!" he called sharply.

The girl entered. She gave a single look at me, then dropped into a chair and covered her face with her hands.

"Another?" she wailed. "Oh, God! No more—no more! This—this horrible—this awful thing has gone far enough."

Lessman stretched his hand towards her. She rose half crouching and approached my side. Then she sprang back again, a look of revulsion spreading over her beautiful face.

"Some other time. Some other time," she wailed. "I cannot go through with it to-day."

A dog-whip was lying on one of the chairs. Lessman seized it and brought it down across her beautiful shoulders. With the first blow her attitude changed. For an instant she cowered in the corner. Then, as he struck her again, he hissed a word of command. She tore her gown open in the front and allowed its folds to drop around her. Across the white flesh the cruel whip raised a dozen red welts. She took a step closer her tormenter. Again and again he struck her with all the force at his command.

The expression on her face was not one of pain, but of sensual enjoyment. She uttered no sound as she stood there, her lips parted slightly in a smile that showed her gleaming teeth, a look of almost godlike devotion in her wonderful eyes. With a snarl the doctor finally hurled the whip upon the floor. She leaped forward and dropped

to her knees at his feet, her arms raised in an attitude of supplication.

"You are my master!" she exclaimed proudly. "My body is yours to command. My soul belongs to God, but you are its keeper."

He smiled triumphantly. Slowly he turned on the balls of his feet and pointed to me. Her eyes brightened. For an instant she crouched like a panther about to spring. Then she turned to him again.

"Something tells me that somewhere another holds my heart like a burning pearl between his hands, Master," she wailed.

"This is he," Lessman asserted.

Her face changed. She moved towards me slowly, her rounded arms extended. I prayed. God, how I prayed! The world danced before my eyes. Something was happening. My very soul was being torn from its moorings. She pressed her lips to mine. I attempted to push her from me—to shriek for help. I was unable to move, to utter a sound.

Before me the burning eyes of Lessman seared into my brain. Something seemed to tell me that I was not myself—that I was someone else—someone who had known and loved this girl in the dim past. . . . Then consciousness left me.

III. THE AWAKENING

I returned to consciousness with a start. I was lying on a cot in a bleak unfurnished room. The sun was shining brightly through the uncurtained window. The beetle-browed man I had seen in the garden at the time of my entrance was sitting on a broken chair close to the foot of the bed regarding me with an idiotic grin.

For an instant I lay there trying to collect my thoughts. Then recollection swept over me. The remembrance of that meeting in the doctor's office—everything—came to me with a rush. I swung my feet to the floor and rose unsteadily. The man with the beetle brows gave a peculiar

guttural cry and took to his heels, slamming the door behind him.

Unconsciously I swept my hand across my chin. My face was covered with a day's growth of stubble. Yet I had visited the barber just before driving to Lessman's. I glanced down at my wrist-watch. It had stopped. The thought flashed across my mind that I had slept the clock round. I felt groggy and tired. My brain declined to function. For an instant the room swam before my eyes. Was I dreaming? No.

I wondered if I was a prisoner. Summoning all my will-power I staggered to the door through which the shaggy-haired man had retreated. It was unlocked. I stepped out into the hallway.

Unlike the lavishly-furnished room where I had met Doctor Lessman, the hall was unfurnished and bare. Cobwebs hung from the ceiling; the corners were festooned with them. The floor was covered with dust. The paper was mildewed and torn. On either side the doors were open. I noted that none of the apartments were furnished. All bore the same evidence of desertion that the hall showed.

I was on the second floor. That much was apparent. I dragged my weary body round the corner and came upon a stairway leading downward. I descended, finally emerging upon the lower level almost in front of Lessman's office. The door was open. I entered.

The saturnine physician was seated beside the table smoking, a book between his fingers. He turned slowly at my approach, his eyes gazing into vacancy. Then recognition swept over him and he gave me a slight nod.

"You are—yes, you are Cope," he said slowly. "Sit down. What do you want?"

"My freedom," I answered bitterly.

He raised his arched eyebrows questioningly.

"My dear man, you are free to go whenever you choose," he answered almost irritably. "You came here as a voluntary patient and asked for treatment. I——"

anything save what I have written here. I know that I am as sane as I ever was, except for the hallucinations and the inability to obey my own will. But if I continue to dream as I have been dreaming I shall be a raving maniac before long. . . .

I had another dream last night. God, it was diabolical! I will try and describe it. Lessman seemed to be calling me. I leaped from my couch and hurried through the darkened corridors to a huge room at the rear of the house. The door was open and the place was brilliantly lighted. Lessman, clad in a surgeon's smock, was waiting for me. Meta, in her trim nurse's garb, stood a little way back. She smiled as I entered and gave me a friendly nod.

The room was fitted up like the interior of a hospital. In the centre was an operating-table. There were vials and retorts and shelves filled with bottles and boxes and several cases of bright instruments. To one side was a door. Lessman commanded me to open it. His will was mine. A draught of cold air greeted me as I stepped inside. It was like an ice-house, only the air was dead and mouldy. Once I was inside a morgue. It was the same—there was a feeling of deadness even in the atmosphere.

He turned on an electric light. It *was* a morgue. On marble slabs lay several bodies in their grave clothes. Nearest the door was the young man I had dreamed of stealing from the grave the night before. At Lessman's command I picked up the cold form in my arms and carried it to the outer room and laid it on a leather-covered couch.

As I straightened up I caught a glimpse of Lessman's eyes. They gazed through me like twin X-rays. I heard his voice calling me as from a great distance, telling me to separate myself from my body. Then came a feeling of dissolution. Time after time I seemed to be falling through space—falling—falling—falling. I would catch myself with a jerk, standing in another part of the room, but my body was in front of Lessman. I was puzzled. Always, as I have said, just as my soul seemed to be leaving my body, something would snap and I would find myself gazing into Lessman's eyes.

"I can't do it to-night," I heard him mutter to Meta. "It is not the subject's fault, however, but my own. For some reason I am unable to concentrate. It will have to be you again."

My last recollection was of hearing Meta sobbing.

I woke again with the same feeling of lassitude and inertia.

Great God above ! It was not a dream. Everything is clear to me now. I have the satisfaction of knowing, however, that I am not insane. In prowling through the house only to-day I chanced to find the floor of the operating-room or laboratory open. I entered. The place was unoccupied. The interior was just as it had appeared to me in my vision, dream, or whatever it was. Across the room was the door opening into the little morgue. I moved towards it and had my hand on the knob when I heard the voices of Lessman and Meta in the office. I darted out and was half-way up the stairs when they appeared.

What is this charnel-house ? What is the ghastly plot in which I appear to be one of the central figures ?

IV. A NIGHT OF HORROR

My mind is in a haze as I write these lines. Something has happened to me—something so weird, so unbelievable, that I can scarce believe it myself. I am not myself ! I am someone else ! I am the dead man who was buried in the little cemetery adjoining this foul place, and whose cold, cold clay Jake—Lessman and Meta call the beetle-browed man Jake—and I disinterred. And yet I am—I must be—Carter Cope. I think as Carter Cope. My actions are those of Carter Cope. . . . God, it is awful ! There is no one to whom I can talk. I must write, or my already tottering mind will break entirely. I say that I am Carter Cope and yet that I am someone else. The body of Carter Cope lies in the little morgue in the rear of Doctor Lessman's laboratory. I have seen it with my own eyes. Yet

I am Carter Cope. I am here. But is this I? Where will I commence on this chapter?

Last night I heard the voice of Lessman calling me again. Yet there was no voice save in my own mind. It must have been the thought-waves from his marvellous brain beating against my subconsciousness. I rose from my lowly cot and obeyed his command. He and Meta—curse their foul souls!—were in the laboratory. She was clad in some sort of thin transparent material through which every curve of her beautiful sensuous body showed. As I entered she gazed at me with a look of indescribable longing. Her blood-red lips were half parted over her pearly teeth; her wonderful eyes were filled with languorous passion. She took a step towards me, her soft, white hands extended beguilingly, her rounded breasts rising and falling with each breath. Lessman turned and waved her back to the couch on which she had been half reclining. Lessman owns me. . . . He owns me, body and soul. I am his to command. I know this now. I desired this woman, yet I made no movement towards her because he willed otherwise. At his command I turned away from this rare creature of flesh and blood to the door of the little morgue and staggered forth with the stiff, frozen body of the young man whom I have already mentioned. I placed it on the operating-table, then looked at my master, Lessman, inquiringly.

"My experiments with you have not been altogether successful," he told me in his calm low voice. "Somewhere, deep in your subconscious mind, your will is battling against that which I am striving to do. In order to make my experiment a success you must be complaisant.

"I am, my friend, attempting to change the law laid down by the Creator of all things. I am attempting the transference of the soul. Think of it! For those who know my secret there will be no such thing as death—only a moving on from one shape to another. When man's body wears out he need only discard it and assume another, and so continue on and on to the end of time.

"Science, my friend, has shown us that life—the soul, the essence of being—weights only the infinitesimal part of an ounce. Yet without it we cease to be. The young man whose carnal shell lies before you weighs practically as much as he ever did. The same framework of bones supports his flesh. Yet he is nothing—a mere clod! Why? Because the thing we call life is missing. It is that spark which, with your help, I propose to give him for the time being.

"Time after time I have succeeded with the assistance of Meta, but never with another. Look at her, my friend, is she not beautiful? She is yours if you but give me your aid. Allow your subconscious mind to lie dormant for an instant until I catch your soul. Will you do it? The prize is well worth winning."

Fool! Fool that I was! Did I not know that his long harangue was merely to compose my soul so that it would be more pliable in his hands? Did I not know that Meta was but the bait to draw me into the trap? I caught a little glimpse of her. She smiled at me. Something within me snapped. . . .

I was a vapour—a thin, transparent, foglike vapour. My body—the body of Carter Cope—lay sprawled on the floor in the middle of the room while I—that is, my aura—floated wraithlike above it. Lessman bent forward, his eyes glittering like twin fires of hell, his arms outstretched towards me.

I could think. My brain was clear. I realized everything that was going on, yet I was powerless to resist my master's call. His voice was calling to me, ordering me to enter the body of the dead man on the operating-table. I made no struggle now. I was too far gone to fight his command.

Blackness. . . . Egyptian darkness—the darkness of the infernal regions. And cold—the chill iciness of death—the arctic cold of dead, frozen flesh. . . .

I felt a thrill of life pound through my veins. Then came a sensation of delightful warmth. I pulled myself erect.

As true as there is a God in heaven I was the dead man. Yet I was not dead. I was alive.

My own discarded body, the body of Carter Cope, lay like a cast-off garment before me. I almost smiled as I noted a tiny rent in the leg of the trousers where I had torn it on a bramble the day before. The clothes I now wore were new—the grave clothes of the boy who had been buried.

Lessman turned to Meta. His voice trembled with excitement as he addressed her :

“Success ! Success at last !” he exclaimed triumphantly. “This, then, is the beginning of the end of my long years of labour.”

He leaned forward and whispered something in her ear. She drew back with a little gesture of disgust. He jerked the whip from beneath his smock and struck her across the shoulders. With the first blow she dropped on her knees before him, her arms extended, her face upturned. In her eyes was a look of æsthetic bliss.

The wraithlike garment dropped from her rounded shoulders across which the cruel whip raised a criss-cross of welts. The red blood trickled from them in tiny streams over the smooth, white flesh.

“More ! More !” she begged in a soft low voice. “I am Laela, priestess of Isis. Was I wrong when I loved even though I had taken the vow of celibacy ? Tell me, O High Priest, ere you scourge me again.”

He hurled her from him as if she was unclean. She rose slowly to her feet and drew her garment over her bleeding shoulders. She took a step towards him, her arms outstretched.

“Scourge me, my master,” she wailed. “But take me not away from my beloved.”

He struck her again. She turned to me. Something—I know not what it was—passed over me. She was calling me. Yet she made no sound. I advanced towards her. She met me. For an instant we stood facing each other. I looked into her wonderful eyes. Then our lips met in one long, long kiss.

A feeling of bliss swept over me. Words cannot describe it. I glanced over Meta's shoulder. Lessman's eyes were upon me. They bored through me. My temporal body seemed to disappear, leaving my soul alone to meet that of Meta. . . .

Again a feeling of nothingness swept over me. Then came a strange buoyancy. . . .

I was Meta Vanetta!

Before me stood the dead man—not dead, but pulsating with life. His arms were about me. He clasped me to him, drawing me so close that my face was pressed against his shoulder.

I was two beings—myself and Meta.

How can I explain it? I was Meta Vanetta. But was Meta Carter Cope? Impossible! I was still Carter Cope. Yet the body of Carter Cope lay on the floor where I had left it when I entered the shell of the man who stood before me. Upon his hands was blood—blood from the reeking gashes made by the whip on the shoulders of Meta.

Lessman's eyes! Again that feeling of oblivion—or nothingness—swept over me. I was drifting . . . drifting through space . . . drifting . . .

I awoke. I was leaning against the wall swaying dizzily. Meta stood on the other side of the room. She was leaning forward, her eyes gazing hungrily at me, her white arms extended towards me beseechingly.

"Beloved!" I heard her call.

Then nothingness again.

Great God! I cannot understand it.

When I awoke I was lying on my bed of straw. Jake, the beetle-browed man, sat up when he heard me stir and gazed at me frightened. Then he ran from the room. His eyes were wide with terror.

There is no mirror by which I can confirm my thoughts. *But I know that I am not Carter Cope! I am the dead man we took from the grave!* Jake knows it. That is why he runs away from me.

My hands are covered with blood—Meta's blood.

V. THE DANCE OF THE DEAD

Two days have passed since I made my last entry in this account of my life here in this diabolical House of the Living Dead. The House of the Living Dead ! What a title that would be for a story. But the author would be locked up for the remainder of his life in some asylum. No one would believe that it was anything but the wanderings of a diseased mind.

Lessman is treating me better now since his experiment with me proved a success. I have been taken away from the room which I shared with Jake, and I am now lodged in an apartment on the first floor. Here there are all of the conveniences of modern life save one—a razor. There is a bathtub. I can keep myself clean. And, too, I have been given fresh linen. Lessman insists, however, that I allow my beard to grow and that my hair remains uncut. He probably figures that a tangled mass of whiskers and long dark hair will prove an effectual disguise should anyone who knows me see me from the road. And he is right. There is a mirror in the room I now occupy. I looked into it yesterday and almost failed to recognize myself in the tall, gaunt, bewhiskered man who gazed out at me.

I see a great deal of Meta now. Lessman is a devil incarnate. I believe that he has sold himself to the ruler of hell. He knows that I love Meta and that I cannot oppose his will as long as he allows us to mingle together. And I—I, poor fool, know that Meta is but his tool. She knows it too. She loves me, but yet she obeys his every command. Daily, hourly, I feel my will-power growing weaker and weaker. The brain of Doctor Darius Lessman is my brain. I cannot think for myself when he wills otherwise. That is why this screed is so rambling and incoherent. It is only when he wills it that I have the inclination to bestir myself. Time passes and I do not know it. I do not even know what day of the month this is. I do not care.

I wonder why Lessman allows me to continue my

writing? Someone is liable to find this scrawl. He does not seem to worry about it, however. Meta believes that he knows that this outpouring of my soul is the link which binds me to sanity—the safety valve which keeps me from growing totally demented. Perhaps she is right. Lessman is a wonderful man. I am growing to like him more and more—devil though he is.

I have had several long talks with Meta. She is one woman in a million. She is more—much more—subservient to Lessman's will than I am. For some reason when we are together he withdraws his power over us and allows us to think for ourselves. . . . But does he? Or do we just think that such is the case? Her mind is a blank on many things which have happened. She has no recollection of her constant assertions when under the influence of Lessman's whip that she is the reincarnation of someone—some long-dead priestess of some strange Egyptian cult. Yet she says that she always comes out of such spells feeling buoyant and light-hearted. She says that she suffers no pain when the cruel lash cuts into her flesh, but, on the contrary, each blow fills her with a strange love for her tormentor. Not a sexual passion, but, rather, the love of a neophyte for the Creator of all things. As a matter of experiment she has asked me to beat her; on several occasions I have tried to inflict bodily pain upon her, but the effect is different from when Lessman strikes her. Even a faint blow from my hand hurts her and causes her to shrink away from me.

She has no recollection of any other life than that with Lessman. She has been with him so long that she is almost a part of him. She does not know how old she is, nor has she any memory of a childhood. She reads and writes with ease, and is an accomplished musician. Yet she says that she never attended school and does not know where she gained her accomplishments.

She believes that Lessman is two beings—that he has divided his soul and that half of it occupies her body. She believes that she is very old. Sometimes, she says,

she has hazy recollections of a distant country—of another life in the midst of lotus flowers and robed priests and priestesses. She has never been in Egypt, yet she is certain that it is of Egypt that she dreams. She believes that she is occupying the temporal body of someone else, but that her soul is as old as time itself.

Who is Darius Lessman? Meta does not know. Within his skull is concentrated the wisdom of the ages. His most cherished possessions, she says, are two mummy-cases. In one of them is the mummified body of a priestess of Isis, and in the other that of a priest of that strange Egyptian cult of a bygone day. He keeps them under lock and key in a vault. Meta believes that he is the reincarnation of that priest and that she is the priestess. Who knows?

Meta and I have twice attempted to escape from the weird and unholy place. On both occasions we have got as far as the gate, yet we could not pass through it. Lessman's spell is too strong for us to break.

Lessman rarely shows himself by day. He is a denizen of the darkness. I picture him in my mind's eye as consorting with the bats and owls and other inhabitants of the night. It is only at night that we see him, save on rare occasions. Meta says that he can work his hellish incantations better after sundown. . . .

This afternoon we searched the house for him. He was neither within or on the grounds. We even peered into the little morgue. The palatial office was unoccupied. The door to the little vault was open, and I looked within. The two sarcophagi leaned against the wall. I turned away, and an instant later Lessman stepped through the door. Yet I am willing to swear that, save for the two mummy-cases the vault was bare. I was too astounded for words. Nor did he make any explanation.

Later I discussed the matter with Meta. She believes that Lessman has the power to project himself into the body of the mummy, and that he takes such rest as he may need in that manner. If so, where does he leave his mortal body? Yet she cannot be wrong. We have

searched the house and have found no bedchamber for him. Meta says that she has no recollection of ever seeing him sleep. Where does he disappear to during the day unless it is within the mummy-case?

More horror! A dance of the dead! Lessman is succeeding far beyond his wildest dreams. He says that I was the turning-point in his experiments.

Last night he ordered Jake and me to bring from the morgue the three bodies that it contained. There was the young man whose shape I had assumed before, and a young and beautiful girl. There was also a young, fair-haired man with throat cut from ear to ear. Into these shells he transferred the souls of Meta, Jake and myself. Then to the music of a radio—to the music of a dance orchestra playing in the dining-room of one of New York's finest hotels—we, the dead, held hellish jubilee. For hours we danced and cavorted while our own bodies lay sprawled, like discarded garments, on the floor before us. God, it is horrible to think of it now in the clear, bright light of noonday! Last night it was different.

Meta assumed the body of the girl, I that of the young man we had stolen from the cemetery, while Jake took on the temporal form of the man with the slashed throat.

It is of Jake and the other that I would write. That Jake is Priestly Ogden is now a certainty. He told me so himself while the orchestra rested between dances in that far-away station in New York. Yet his story is so strange, so unbelievable, that I scarce know how to tell it.

Lessman killed him. The slash across his throat was made with a razor which tore through windpipe and jugular. Think of it! A man with his throat cut from ear to ear dancing, cavorting, gamboling to the strains of a modern orchestra playing "Betty Coed"—an orchestra whose music was brought to us through the air on the invisible waves of sound.

Lessman enticed him to this place. The girl was there—the girl whose form Meta had assumed. In driving past the house Ogden noticed her in the garden and stopping engaged her in conversation. He had fallen in love at



sight. Lessman, appearing from nowhere, had invited him to return. That is how he came by the slip of paper bearing the name of Lessman. He had returned next day. Later, when he was under Lessman's spell, he had found that he was in love with a dead woman—a girl who had been filched from the grave six months before and whose shell sheltered the soul of Meta.

Within the morgue lay the body of Jake. Night after night Lessman worked with Ogden in an effort to force his soul into the cold clay, but without success. In a fit of anger he had killed his victim. Then, as Ogden's soul was leaving its shell, Lessman had captured it and confined it inside the body of Jake, the half-wit. All this he told me, and more, as we stood there waiting for the orchestra to strike up another tune. Yes, it is horrible—too horrible to mention now that I am temporarily out from under the spell of the master mind. But last night it was different.

Lessman was pleased with the success of last night's experiment. He has a treat in store for us to-night, he says. He told us that last night after we had shed the bodies of the dead and had assumed our own shapes—told us after we had carried the cold, stark bodies back into the gloomy morgue.

A crew of workmen erected a tombstone over the grave of the young man whose body we stole from the cemetery. His name is John Reid. He was twenty-six years of age. It is graven on the marble slab.

If they only knew the truth ! . . .

VI. THE STOLEN SOUL

I must write. If I do not I shall go mad. Already I feel my reason tottering. Last night I helped Lessman to steal a soul. In the eyes of God and man I am as much criminal as he is. Yet am I? What I did was at his dictation. I have no will of my own. It would make a pretty case for the courts—something for the learned

judges and lawyers to spout and rave about until doomsday.

How can I describe what we did? I know so little of psychology, of philosophy, of theology. It is hard for me to write intelligently. Suffice to say that it is Lessman's theory—this much do I understand—that the doctrine of reincarnation is correct. Souls, he says, never die, but go on and on, changing the old bodies for new as speedily as the ancient shell is worn out. He believes that there are just as many people in the world now as there were in the beginning—no more and no less. He says that there is no such thing as nothingness. Matter dies, decays and returns to the earth from which it came. The globe on which we live weighs just as much as it did when it was created. A single ounce more would throw it out of balance; a single ounce less would do the same thing. Just as water evaporates, congeals and returns to the earth in the form of hail and snow and rain, so, he believes, do souls leave one shell and return to occupy another while the body returns to dust.

He would change the process laid down by the Creator. It is his idea that the soul can go on and on in a different way—by changing its abiding place before that strange thing called death occurs. He can extract the soul and mould it to his own needs, but in his opinion it must always have a dwelling-place. Until such a dwelling-place is found the soul is doomed to wander through space a wraith, or, as we term it, a ghost.

Last night we took a holiday—the holiday of the dead. From some unknown source Lessman obtained an automobile. Into it he loaded all of us. But was it we who occupied the seats? I do not know. My own soul occupied the shell of John Reid. Jake was in his own form, but I know now that he is Priestly Ogden. Meta's ego was transferred into the body of Ogden's sweetheart. The dead girl's name was Nona Metzgar, she told us. Why did he not allow us to use our own earthly shapes? I mustered up courage enough to ask him. He said that it was to insure our safety in case we were seen. In other

words, Jake and Nona and young Reid were all known to be dead. Who, then, would believe the story of anyone who claimed to have seen this array of occupants of the grave in the act of performing their ghoulish work?

He laid before us new clothing in which we arrayed our bodies. He himself assumed the shell of Priestly Ogden and took the wheel. The horrible gash in his throat showed just above the collar of his shirt. Ugh! I shudder even now as I think about it. Imagine a man with throat cut from ear to ear driving a car filled with living dead men and women!

At the edge of a town a dozen or so miles away was a burying-ground. Here we stopped. Lessman, who had evidently posted himself in advance, led the way through the darkness straight to the newly-made grave. Jake and I followed with the shovels, while Meta brought up in the rear with a lantern. The rain was falling in a steady drizzle; had we not been numbered among the dead ourselves the work of disinterring the coffin would have been a dismal one.

We had got little more than started when a sound in the bushes brought us to a sudden halt. An instant later half a dozen men dashed out of the undergrowth. At Lessman's command we took to our heels. They shouted an order to us. Then, when we did not stop, they fired a volley. The range was close, and they could not miss. A dozen bullets went through our dead flesh. But of what avail is it to shoot leaden bullets into the carcass of a man who is already dead? We laughed at the thought of it. The hellishness of our mirth caused them to stop. One of them was nearly on top of us. At the sound of our laughter he turned the beam of his flashlight upon us. It struck Lessman fairly in the face. They got one look at the grisly gash in his throat. They dropped their arms and took to their heels, while we returned to the car and made our escape.

We drove through the rain another dozen miles or more, finally coming to another large cemetery. This

time, however, Lessman did not stop at the edge of the grounds, but drove straight through the gate and up one of the gravelled roads which curved through the trees and neatly trimmed foliage. Five minutes later we were in front of a large mausoleum. For an instant he probed at the lock, and then the barred doors opened and we entered.

There were a dozen coffins in the niches. He turned to the nearest of them and commanded Jake to pry it open with his spade. The half-wit obeyed. An instant later we were gazing down at the still, cold face of a man of middle age.

Dawn was not far away, so we were forced to work fast. It took Lessman but an instant to project his soul—or ego, if you wish—from the form of the murdered Priestly Ogden to that of the man in the coffin. An instant later the latter climbed from his narrow cot, the life-blood flowing through his veins.

At Lessman's command we picked up the body of Priestly Ogden and placed it in the coffin. Then we stole forth into the clean outside air again.

Once more we were fated to be interrupted. We were about to enter the car when the watchman came hurrying round the corner of the huge vault. He caught a glimpse of the car, and at the same time the open doors of the mausoleum, and shouted a command to us to halt. We paid no attention to his order. He turned the beam of his lantern on us just as the man in the other cemetery had done.

As the light struck Lessman squarely in the face the startled watchman uttered a cry of horror. What must have been his astonishment at seeing a man whom he had assisted in placing in the tomb only a few days before sitting at the wheel of a car in front of his last resting-place? Lessman laughed—a hellish, diabolical chuckle. The man turned and fled. We heard him scrambling through the bushes and undergrowth, howling with terror. Lessman switched on the ignition, and, an hour later, we were back in our own bodies again.

In the beginning of this chapter I stated that I had helped Lessman to steal a soul. Let me explain.

Dawn was just breaking when we arrived at the place we called home—the House of the Living Dead. Lessman sent Jake somewhere with the car, and, a moment later, assumed his own shape.

It was shortly before eight o'clock when a man appeared at the door—a tall, heavy-set individual well dressed and prosperous-looking. Lessman had evidently been expecting the visitor; he hastily told me what to do, and now I, in the rôle of butler, answered the door and ushered the man into the office.

I did not see what passed between the doctor and his visitor. I only know that, fifteen minutes after he had entered the house, Lessman summoned me again to assist him, this time in carrying the stranger into the laboratory. The poor devil was not dead. His brain was apparently normal, but every faculty was paralysed just as mine had been that first time I met Lessman. There was a look of appeal in his eyes as I entered the room. Evidently he thought that he might expect some help from me. But so strong is the power of Darius Lessman over me that I paid no heed to him.

Once in the laboratory Lessman worked fast. For an instant only he confronted the other. Slowly the spirit left the body, and, hovering for a instant in mid-air, entered the soul of the middle-aged man we had stolen from the mausoleum.

Lessman turned to me, a look of triumph on his saturnine countenance.

"You can see now why I wanted the body," he said with the air of a professor demonstrating to his class. "The soul, my friend, must have a resting-place or else be doomed to wander for ever over the face of the earth. Now I want to borrow the body of this man for a day or two. Why? Because I must make a trip to the city. I need money with which to carry on my work here—money and other things. This man is wealthy. Perhaps while I am occupying his shell I will do things without the law.

He has influence. Later, when I am through with it, I will transfer his soul back to its rightful resting-place and allow him to answer for the things that I have done—for the liberties I have taken. But first I will make his mind a blank in so far as the happenings here are concerned. Now do you understand?"

I shook my head dumbly, still not understanding.

As one sheds an old coat so did Lessman shed his own form and enter the shell of the stranger. He stood erect and drew a great breath into his lungs.

"Eureka! The world is mine!" he said.

Lessman has just spoken to me as I wrote the above.

"Write Finis to your screed," he commanded. "Do you think that I have thus allowed you to put your thoughts on paper without having a definite purpose in mind? I am in a hurry. So hasten your work."

This, then, is my last line. I hastily subscribe myself

CARTER COPE.

VII. RIDER MEETS LESSMAN

Rider's face wore a strange, far-away look as he laid the weird manuscript on the desk. Again he slowly filled his pipe, so absorbed in his thoughts that the match flame singed his fingers before he noticed what he was doing. He dropped the burning match with an oath and picked up the newspaper clipping which had accompanied Carter Cope's communication.

MYSTERIOUS HAPPENINGS IN OAKWOOD CEMETERY I

BODY OF PROMINENT MAN STOLEN FROM TOMB—BODY OF SUICIDE IS SUBSTITUTED—CARETAKER TELLS OF SEEING DEAD MAN IN CAR.

The body of Amos Hoskins, prominent philanthropist, was stolen from the mausoleum at Oakwood cemetery on Monday night, and in its place was substituted the body of a young man named Priestly Ogden, who has been missing from his home for the past several months, and who now, judging from the condition of the body, has been found to have committed suicide.

Jabez Heckwood, the cemetery caretaker, who lives in a small house just inside the grounds, was aroused from his slumber about 3 o'clock in the morning by the sound of a car driven into the grounds. Hastily dressing, he armed himself with a revolver and flashlight and hurried to the mausoleum, in front of which he noted the car had stopped.

He was just in time to see four persons—three men and one woman—hurrying from the mausoleum to the car. He shouted at them to halt, at the same time pointing his flashlight in their direction.

The leader of the party of four, according to caretaker Heckwood, was Amos Hoskins.

In view of the fact that Mr. Heckwood had, only two days earlier, assisted in placing the body of Mr. Hoskins—who died on Thursday at his home, 1739 South Masefield Street—in the tomb, it is needless to state that he was badly frightened. Dropping flashlight and revolver, he hurried to his home, where he telephoned the cemetery officials and members of the Hoskins family.

Upon arrival at the cemetery the party found that the lock of the mausoleum had been picked and the body of Mr. Hoskins removed. In the casket lay the body of a young man whose throat was cut from ear to ear. From official descriptions, the police identified him as Priestly Ogden, 4519 Lenroot Avenue, who disappeared from home several months ago. Identification was later completed by distant relatives.

Ogden was, without doubt, a suicide.

"The police are investigating. The family of Mr. Hoskins has offered a reward of \$5,000 for information leading to the recovery of the body and conviction of the ghouls.

For an instant Rider sat in silence. Then he reached for the telephone, lifted the receiver and gave a number.

"Lincoln Tavern?" he inquired. Then: "I would like to speak to Mr. John Harper."

An instant later the connection was made. As the voice of Harper came booming over the wire, Rider spoke again.

"Rider speaking," he said tersely. "I am accepting your commission. I visit Lessman to-morrow morning."

Dawn was still two hours away when Rider, his car parked a quarter of a mile away, broke through the tangle of bush which surrounded the House of the Living Dead, and, dodging furtively from shadow to shadow, finally reached his objective.

There was a light in one of the rooms in the rear of the house. He crept closer to the windows and attempted to listen. Only silence greeted his ears. The shades were tightly drawn, leaving not a crack through which he could peer.

Why had he told John Harper a falsehood? Why had he told the attorney that he would visit Lessman in the morning? He scarcely knew himself. Asa Rider was a man who believed in hunches. Something—some vague, indescribable sixth sense—had warned him of danger. He had made hasty inquiries.

John Harper had disappeared from his home twenty-four hours before. He had left no word where he was going, nor had cautious inquiries at the lawyer's office elicited any information.

Were John Harper and Doctor Darius Lessman one and the same? Was John Harper the man who had appeared at Lessman's house of horror in the early hours of the morning? Was it his soul which now reposed in the dead body of Amos Hoskins while Lessman masqueraded in his stolen body? Had Lessman given him the weird, unbelievable manuscript written by Carter Cope in an effort to trap him? Rider believed that he had. But why? The pseudo-lawyer had answered the question himself when he had told Rider that he had selected him for the dangerous task of seeking Carter Cope because there was none to mourn him should he, like Cope, disappear from the haunts of men.

In the rear of the house was a tiny lean-to. Above it a window. Cope had stated that the upper floor was untenanted save for the man Jake, and he was, in all probability, with the others in the lighted room.

Removing his shoes Rider climbed the lattice-work to the roof of the little out-building. The window was unlocked. He raised it slightly and allowed the beam of his flashlight to play over the bare untenanted room. An instant later he was inside.

He could hear the sound of subdued conversation now. He reached for his revolver. Then he recalled the

statement made by Carter Cope. Leaden bullets had no effect on men and women who were already dead. With a shrug of his shoulders he replaced the weapon in his holster, and, cautiously opening the door, entered the long unlighted hall.

The door of the room in the rear of the house was open. He dodged down the stairs, halting for an instant in front of the office Carter Cope had described. The door was ajar, the room in darkness. He dodged inside and turned the beam of his flashlight here and there over the palatial interior. A second door to the left attracted his attention. It, too, was unlocked. He pulled it open and allowed the ray from his lamp to dissipate the darkness.

The little room was vacant save for two Egyptian mummy-cases leaning against the wall.

He heard the sound of a footstep behind him. He turned, but too late. A dozen electric lights flashed into life as someone pressed the switch.

John Harper stood before him.

For an instant the attorney said nothing. Then he took a step forward, a smile of recognition upon his face.

"Ah, I see that you outguessed me," he chuckled. "You are right, Mr. Rider, I am Lessman—Lessman in the shell of John Harper. Luckily something—some sixth sense—called me into this room, else you might have escaped.

He motioned to a chair, seating himself on the opposite side of the table. For an instant Rider hesitated. Then he, too, seated himself.

Lessman rolled a cigarette.

"As you deduced, Rider—you see I am able to read your mind to a certain extent—I needed another man to experiment with. I wanted a clean-cut, healthy specimen—a man whose habits were such that he appeared and disappeared frequently, and whose relatives would make no great fuss if he never returned."

He chuckled.

"John Harper wrote several cheques to-day. In fact,

practically all of his able cash is now in my hands. I have money enough to complete my experiments. Tomorrow Harper will return to his usual haunts. The past forty-eight hours will be a blank to him. He will put it down to temporary amnesia, pocket his loss and say nothing. Meanwhile——"

He leaned forward. A feeling of inertia swept over the detective. He struggled against it in vain. He was paralysed. His muscles refused to co-ordinate. The eyes of the man on the opposite side of the table were boring holes through him, it seemed. His brain was clear, missing not a single detail. He summoned all his will-power in an effort to resist the other. . . .

In spite of the fact that he knew bullets would have no effect on the man who sat before him, Rider had, as the strange feeling of nothingness swept over him, involuntarily reached for the revolver which reposed in its leather holster beneath his left arm. Now as his hand dropped nerveless, his fingers accidentally touched the tiny crucifix which hung suspended from a thin golden chain about his neck.

For an instant as the hypnotic influence of the master mind ceased Rider felt the lifeblood surge through his veins once more. He leaped to his feet, his gnawing fingers tearing at the buttons of his shirt as he jerked the little cross from its resting-place above his heart and held it aloft.

Lessman screamed. He leaped to his feet. The match which he had just lighted and was about to apply to the end of his cigarette dropped from his nerveless fingers.

"The Cross! The Cross!" he screamed hoarsely, staggering backward.

There was a flash. The lighted match falling into the wastepaper basket had ignited it. Now while the two men stood facing each other the flames crept to the window hangings. An instant later the room was an inferno.

Rider, fighting his way through the smoke and fire, the tiny cross still held aloft, fell in a little heap in the

middle of the yard. For five minutes he lay there sucking the fresh night air into his tortured lungs.

From inside the house he heard screams. Then silence. The door opened. Lessman, staggering under the weight of two mummy-cases, dashed through the flame-encircled doorway.

He hurled the cases from him. Then he fell. He dragged himself to his feet, and, turning, re-entered the burning building.

Through the smoke which poured out of the roaring inferno drifted two white mistlike forms. For a moment they were wafted here and there by the suction of the flames. Then form-like, they settled over the two mummy-cases. Lower and lower they hovered until they covered the cases like dew. Then, even Rider, his teeth chattering as if from the ague, watched the vapour disappear within the cases.

"Lessman and Meta," he muttered in an awed whisper. "Carter Cope was right. Within the mummified forms of that long-dead priest and priestess the souls of those two fiends make their home."

Rider darted forward to drag the cases farther away from the burning building, but he was too late, for the roof crumbled and the blazing wall fell out into the mummy-cases, enveloping them in a sheet of flame.

With the coming of morning near-by residents, hurrying from the four quarters of the landscape, raked through the smouldering ruins. The remains of six bodies were found burned beyond recognition.

Of the House of the Living Dead not even the two mummy-cases remained.

THE WINGS

J. DYOTT MATTHEWS

THE WINGS

REALIZATION came to Gerald Lennox that he certainly disliked his room. It came with reluctance.

In some curious way it seemed to oppress him, seemed to stifle him. The walls gave him the impression of being too close, too near ; and yet it was a large room—the largest that this little hotel at Greatcombe, in County Devon, could offer. Then a different idea struck him. Perhaps it was not the room that seemed to be leaning on him. Perhaps it was something from outside. It was as though some cosmic being, some emanation from the earth, some psychic creature of the outer world was bearing down upon him ; it felt like the descriptions he had read in ghost stories of elementals and their potency.

But of course it was all imagination. He had been ordered this holiday by his doctor, who said that he was on the verge of a mental breakdown. His brain, overwrought by too much study, was playing him tricks. That was it. There could be no other explanation. Yet why had the manager seemed so reluctant to let him have the room ? And it was entirely due to old Mr. Larsden, whose acquaintance he had made only on the train coming down, that he was staying here. Certainly, despite his somewhat Scrooge-like appearance Mr. Larsden gave him no other impression than that of the benevolent old gentleman. He had made one queer statement, but that was in answer to a remark of his own which, to one who did not know him intimately, could be designated as nothing but somewhat bizarre.

They had got into conversation in the train carriage, and both had confessed that they were bound for Greatcombe, which, despite its grandiloquent name, is a very small sleepy Devonshire village. Certainly, when he

came to think about it old Larsden had seemed a little unnaturally pleased at the news that they were bound for the same destination, but at the time he had put that down to his desire for companionship in so small and unfrequented a place. But was such eagerness compatible with their relationship as perfect strangers? Somehow he felt inclined to put some other construction on it now. But what other construction was there to put on it? Or, rather, what was there to lead him to put any other meaning to his travelling-companion's attitude? Simply a vague feeling of dislike, which was centred about his room, and which was undoubtedly due to his own overwrought brain.

What was the queer remark that the old man had made? Oh yes! Gerald had said with the queer whimsical humour that was all his own:

"Isn't it funny that birds don't try 'stunting' like our airmen do? I've never seen a bird looping the loop, have you? You'd think that there would at least be a few comedian birds that would do stunts to amuse their feathered friends."

To this Mr. Larsden had answered with his deep sepulchral voice, deeper and more sepulchral than usual, and gazing at him with a queer intentness:

"There are stranger birds on this earth than you have ever dreamed of."

He had said this with an unnatural intensity of feeling, and after saying it had abruptly changed the conversation, but the remark had left an unpleasant impression on Gerald.

Again, was his eagerness to have him at the same hotel entirely to be explained by a natural desire for companionship? He had pressed him to come to the "Ship" tavern, where, he said, he always stayed, owing to its comfort and the excellence of its food—"don't expect *hors d'œuvres* and thick or clear, my son, but it's good and homely," Mr. Larsden had said.

When they had arrived at the "Ship" tavern—Gerald had made no plans for stopping anywhere, thinking that,

if the worst came to the worst he could put up at some fisherman's cottage, and was perfectly willing to go to the inn—Mr. Larsden had said that he could fix him up with a room, as he knew the manager personally. Together the manager and he had gone into the former's glass-enclosed sanctum, leaving Gerald to wander round the lounge and admire the prints of boxers and race-horses which adorned its walls.

Gerald, however, had from birth been blessed with an extraordinarily acute hearing, and without eavesdropping he could not help overhearing a few words of what transpired.

He heard the manager saying: "I don't like to. . . . Yes, of course . . . it's kept aired. . . . Not after dark . . . no one . . . All right, I'll do it." This last to the significant sound of a crinkling banknote.

It was probably this conversation, now he came to think of it, that had set him against his room, for he felt certain that it was about the room that the partly-overheard conversation dealt.

On leaving the manager's office Mr. Larsden had called back:

"I'll show Mr. Lennox to his room. I know where it is. I had it myself a year ago." Then to Gerald: "It's a room that was built on to the main structure a year ago, and is really the biggest and best room in the inn—no damp, you know. You will probably find the furniture a little unusual, but it is all quite comfortable."

"I'm sure I shall like it," was his reply. "What number is it, sir?"

"Number twelve."

Now twelve was Gerald's personal unlucky number. When batting in a cricket match he always dreaded his score being twelve more than it being thirteen. On the twelfth of January his father had died, his mother on the twelfth of February. He had had a nasty motor-cycling accident which had nearly resulted in the amputation of his right leg on a certain twelfth of June. Before he had changed with the owner of locker thirteen, locker twelve

in the changing room at school had, he averred, brought him bad luck at cricket. In fact, before the exchange was effected his score never mounted above twelve. As the owner of thirteen declared that his locker brought bad luck to him, the "swop" had been mutually beneficial.

Consequently it was with no feeling of elation that he approached his room, and on entering it his mood was made no more happy by the sensations recorded before.

However, he put a bold face on things, and having placed his clothes in the drawers of the dressing-table, looked around him. The window first attracted his attention. What were those little, black feathery things hanging on the sill and round the frame? Surely they were feathers! He took a couple of paces towards the window and then stopped still. Why, there was nothing there at all! Perhaps the light was playing him tricks. He stepped back into his original position. No, there was nothing there. It must have been his eyes. He would have to visit an oculist when he got home, although this was the first time he had known them to fail him. Or, perhaps, it was his brain. He had read that the mind was in close touch with the eyes. Yes, it must be one of the effects of too much study. He put everything that could not by any strength of the imagination be called a natural phenomenon, down to this cause.

Then he turned his attention to the bed. Or was it a bed? It looked to him more like a couch of some foreign origin. Turkish? No, it was Persian, he felt sure. The legs were curiously carved, and were chipped in many places. Vaguely he came to realize that the feeling of ill-omen, the sensation of evil which had caused him to shudder when first he entered the room, emanated from the couch.

However, he shook off these, as he then thought, unreasonable fears and went downstairs to the lounge, where he found Mr. Larsden awaiting him.

"How about a little stroll on the cliffs before supper? It is dinner midday here."

"Right-ho, I'm game," said Lennox. He was a fair-haired young man, with a smooth complexion and a kind but rather girlish face. Overwork had knitted furrows on his brow.

He tried hard to broach the subject of his room, and his personal dislike for it, but he found it impossible to tell this apparently practically-minded man of his seemingly unwarrantable fears, his unreasonable doubts. The nearest he could get to doing so was to ask his elderly companion:

"Were you comfortable in my room when you had it last year?"

"Very comfortable, thanks." Then with a strange intensity, "Aren't you?"

Here was his opportunity, here was the opening for which he had craved, but his courage failed him—he was very sensitive and loathed being laughed at—therefore muttering something he turned the conversation into other channels.

It was a raw, rather bleak day for September, almost as bleak, thought Gerald, as their surroundings.

They were walking on sand, out of which grew tufts of long extremely spiky grass, with here and there a mole-hill. Wind-blown stunted gorse bushes studded the top of the cliffs, and over all spread the salt tang of the sea. Swallows and swifts skidded aimlessly around them, trying, Gerald thought whimsically, to make it appear as though they had important business to perform and were in a hurry to do it. Except for the monotonous roar from below as the breakers burst, and the screech as they receded, carrying stones and sand with them, the silence was complete.

Gerald broke it.

"I wonder," he said, "whether I slandered the birds this morning. These seem to be practising stunt-flying, don't they?"

"Yes, they are queer birds, but I've known queerer!"

"What do you mean by that, sir?—it's the second time you've said it."

"I'm hoping—at least probably you'll know in good time," Mr. Larsden said in some confusion.

After a while they retraced their steps as far as the lane in which the inn was situated. Opening a gate the older man said :

"We will go in this way. It leads to the back door through the orchard."

There were luscious-looking late apples still on the trees, but although apples were his favourite fruit Gerald paid no attention to them, for his mind was assailed, on approaching the inn, with an indefinable feeling of horror, a sensation of evil, which is difficult to describe. It was as though his reason was urging him to take to his heels and run—anywhere, anywhere away from this place, while a force stronger than his will-power was urging him on.

As they drew close to the building Gerald happened to look up at the window on its extreme left. Then he took a pace backward, and his face assumed a deathlike colour. His hands started to twitch nervously at the edge of his sports coat.

"What's the matter ?" asked Mr. Larsden.

"Good God, look !" pointing at the window.

"What's the matter ?"

"Can't you see ? At the window there ! Wings—big black ones and thousands of them."

He stopped short.

"I'm not going back there !" he exclaimed. "I'll find some other lodgings for to-night. Good heavens ! It's my bedroom too ! Mine is at the end of that corridor !"

"What utter nonsense you are talking, my boy. There's nothing there. Upon my oath there isn't."

Gerald, who had turned away, now looked again. As Mr. Larsden had said, there was nothing there.

"You are suffering from hallucinations, my son. If you take things quietly during your holiday, however, you'll soon shake that off."

Had Gerald been in a less agitated frame of mind

himself, he would have noticed some perturbation in the older man's voice.

"All the same, I think I'll try to find a bedroom at one of the fishermens' cottages."

"Don't be a fool, Lennox. Don't be a damned coward!" Mr. Larsden was, Gerald was surprised to see, quite angry. "Why, there's nothing there, I tell you, absolutely nothing. It was an hallucination, a figment of your brain. You must be suffering from delusions."

Gerald began to feel ashamed, and said:

"I'm sorry."

Simple words to say, these, and as often as not they mean nothing.

However, Gerald was quite willing to put this construction on his vision, although he was vaguely disturbed by the thought that he might in reality be "seeing things". In his heart of hearts, however, he was more than disquieted by the idea, which still persisted in his brain, that what he had seen had really been behind the window, and was not an hallucination.

They went to dinner, and, when that meal was over, retired to the lounge to smoke—Mr. Larsden a cigar, Gerald a cigarette.

Now there are two distinct classes of cigar-smokers—those who smoke them because they like them and enjoy them, and those who like and enjoy them because they smoke them.

In the train Mr. Larsden had certainly belonged to the former class, but now he seemed to be one of the latter. He seemed oddly ill at ease.

At last Gerald plucked up enough courage to ask what had been troubling him all the evening.

"Do you experience the same curious feeling about this place as I do, sir? Do you sense an indefinable atmosphere of hostility about the 'Ship'?"

"No!" replied the other man, not without signs of nervousness, at the same time allowing the cigar smoke to filter from between his lips. "But, Lennox, there is something I wish to tell you. . . . No, I don't think I

will after all. Anyway, if you should want me at all in the night just yell. I am in the next room to yours."

He left the room at this, and the manager, who happened to pass through the lounge a minute after he had gone, came furtively across the room and approached the settee on which Gerald was seated.

In a low voice he began to whisper :

"I want to tell you, Mr. Lennox, that I had nothing to do with this. It was his doing, not mine——"

At this moment Mr. Larsden reappeared and the manager slunk—yes, slunk is the right word—away in the direction of the kitchen.

"What was he saying to you ?" asked the grey-haired old man.

Gerald was on the point of telling him to mind his own business, but thinking that this man would have to be his pal for most of his stay—there were only two other couples, obviously on their honeymoons, in the inn—did not wish to create any kind of disturbance in their friendship so early on.

Accordingly he said :

"Oh, he was burbling something about it not being his fault !"

"What was not his fault ?"

"He didn't say."

Mr. Larsden seemed relieved at this, but said nothing.

"Do you think, sir, it could be about my room—that he was going to warn me about something connected with it ?"

"What arrant nonsense ! Of course not. Oh, I see, you are still worrying about that fatuous hallucination of yours—but come on, lets get off to bed !"

They went up together and parted at the door of the old man's room.

"Good night," said the latter. "Remember, if you want me I'm in here, and as the walls are not very stout, a call will reach me easily. I am a very light sleeper."

"Am I likely to need you, then ?"

"Oh no ! I don't think so." Then, "Good night."

"Good night, sir," said Gerald, rather perturbed by Mr. Larsden's words. The feeling of evil had seemed to grow stronger with every step he took towards his room, and now it filled him with a feeling of terrible, stark fear, enveloped and overwhelmed him with a sensation of wildest horror.

However, he set his teeth and, whistling an air from the latest film comedy he had seen, forced himself to open the door of his room. As he entered he heard distinctly the sound of flapping wings and saw, or rather thought he saw, dark shapes flying through *the shut window*! It was only a momentary glimpse that he got of it, but he obtained the impression of something evil that was flying through the glass pane. He thought he heard a noise from the end of the passage, and, turning, saw the owner of the hotel looking at him with a frightened stare. He seemed to be about to come forward and speak, but at this moment Mr. Larsden came out of his room, and he turned and hastened from the corridor.

"What's the matter, Lennox?" asked the old man.

"Oh nothing, sir!" said Gerald. "I thought the proprietor had something to say to me."

"You mustn't take too much notice of the proprietor," the old man said, tapping his temple significantly.

Gerald wondered for a moment whether they were all mad, himself included. Then bracing himself for his ordeal he entered his room. No flapping of wings greeted him on this occasion. Could it be all imagination? Had he overworked his brain to such an extent that he was being visited with hallucinations, as his travelling-companion had said? Anyway, the room looked comfortable. The bed looked cosy. But what a curious bed! More like a couch, he thought again. And what extraordinary carvings round it! Still, they would not spoil his rest. Curiously enough, now that he was in the room most of his terror had left him, and although the indefinable feeling of evil still remained, his chief sensation was one of drowsiness.

As soon as he had hurried off his things he lay on the

bed and immediately fell into a sound sleep. In his sleep he experienced a terrifying dream—a dream that was more vivid than any he had ever had before.

He seemed to be stark naked and bound to a couch, which resembled, as far as he could see, the bed in the inn in every particular. He seemed to be waiting for something—something loathsome and vile. Then he saw that he was on the flat roof of a house, for the sky was above him. Suddenly his eyes were riveted on some little black spots in the sky. They seemed to be coming nearer—nearer every moment. He wondered what they could be. Then suddenly he knew. Something seemed to whisper in his ear, "Vultures". He knew that they were coming for him, to peck his eyes out, to devour him slowly, yet inexorably.

Then in a flash it seemed they were upon him. At this he woke up, to find the air peopled by myriads, it seemed, of black shapes. They were birds, but they appeared to Gerald, who had never left England in his life, to be of extraordinary size. Then he realized that they were the birds of his dream. He could see their curved, hooked beaks as they hovered round him, and the wicked-looking skin of their featherless heads.

He lay motionless. His limbs seemed incapable of movement. He thought at first that he was paralysed by sheer terror, but looking down he saw that his arms were bound down to the sides of the bed. In fact, his neck seemed bound too, and he found it exceedingly difficult to see his hands, and could only do so by glancing down. Curiously enough, in that moment of abject terror, that period of profound horror, the thought struck him that Mr. Larsden would not be able, with his corpulence, to see his hands were he in a similar position.

Slowly, almost imperceptibly, the black objects came nearer and nearer to him. More and more were teeming in through the closed window, until the air became thick with them and their fetid smell. His eyes! He had read that they were the members that they attacked first. He must protect them. But how?

Then suddenly in a great wave the horror of the

situation in which he found himself swept over him. He tried to shout to Mr. Larsden, but something seemed to clog his throat, and this, combined with the dryness of his lips and tongue, choked down any utterance which he tried to make. Cold beads of perspiration crept on to his forehead. He was filled with agony of thought, torture of expectation. He tried to close his eyes, but that only seemed to make the sound of their flapping wings all the louder. Besides, like a rabbit by a snake, he was fascinated with the terrible sight.

Again he tried to rise, but the effort was in vain. The beaks of the birds which were flying lower than the others were only about four inches away from his eyes by now. He tried to console himself by repeating that they were phantom birds, that they had no existence in the finite, but it brought him little comfort. He could see their evil heads more plainly now, and noticed the bloody saliva dripping from their half-open beaks. This he saw in an eerie sort of phosphorescent glow which seemed to emanate from the couch on which he was lying, for the dark creatures completely obscured the window.

Then of a sudden his voice came back to him, and in a husky tone he called to Mr. Larsden, who was waiting outside the door expecting some such summons. He flung the door open and dashed into the room. As he did so the black creatures swarmed out of the closed window and were gone.

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Three weeks later Gerald, who had been in a delirium during that space of time, recovered his sanity. It was not, however, until a fortnight after this that the doctor allowed him to talk about his dream. He was very weak, and was housed in Mr. Larsden's flat at Lancaster Gate.

When he had finished his recital of the events of that night, Mr. Larsden said :

"I shall never forgive myself, my boy, for letting you sleep there. You see, I had the same experience as you at the "Ship" last year, and being a member of the

Psychical Research Society, determined to find out if it was a dream or not. Consequently when I met you I thought that Providence had sent you to help me. I didn't realize that your nerves were so much overwrought, or I wouldn't have countenanced the idea for one moment. I bribed the proprietor to give you that room, and didn't wish to warn you in case you changed your lodgings. I was a heartless fool. I never thought that it would have this effect on you. I have never stopped cursing myself since. The curious thing in both our cases is that on our arms we both bore the evident marks of thongs. I have made enquiries from the proprietor, and found out that he bought the bed in that room shortly before my first visit there. I examined it and found some markings in Persian characters inscribed on it with a sharp instrument, probably a nail. The poor devil who wrote it must have been able just to move his wrist. This is what it was, when translated :

"They have tied me down. The vultures . . .

"They must have got him before he could write more."

THE GREAT WHITE FEAR

OSCAR COOK

THE GREAT WHITE FEAR

MERVYN AIRD was essentially energetic. He was also a capable district officer and a quick worker. Lying in the long chair on the verandah of his bungalow, he inwardly cursed the enforced idleness of three days' holiday necessarily proclaimed by Government in honour of a native annual festival. In view of the holiday it was of no use to travel the district; no one would wish to see even the Tuan Pegawei (district officer) at such a time. His quickness had left the office bare of papers. His clerks would resent any attempt to infringe their right of three days to themselves if he were insistent enough to find work for them to do. So he lay in the long chair on his verandah, smoking and making plans for the future.

The plans forming in his head led to a certain train of thought. He moved restlessly in the chair. His eyes ever sought a roof just visible through the coconut palms that fringed the lower slopes of the hills on which the bungalow was built. The roof made a dark-brown line that sharply divided the green of the palms from the blue of the swelling sea that formed the waters of Brunei Bay, bounded on the left by a long, low, rocky promontory known as Serip's Cave. The line of the roof and the line of rocks ran into one.

Aird's gaze followed from the roof to the rocks, and his brow puckered. What if there were truth in the rumour after all? If the sacred rocks were the home of the fabled Spirit of the Great White Death? If the Spirit were no spirit at all, but a living woman, as some said? What if among the rocks rested the answer to the riddle of Cranfield's death and Cranfield's daughter?

Mervyn Aird's lids drooped over his eyes; another minute and his plans would have turned to dreams.

From the district office sounded the deep note of a

native gong, struck slowly four times by the native sentry on watch. Aird's eyes opened and he sat up with a jerk. He was wide awake, the chance of a siesta a thing of the past. He rose from his chair, picked up his terai, whistled his dog, and descended the zigzag path that led to the office.

A few minutes later he stood by his desk and wiped the perspiration from his forehead. Then, continuing the trend of thought he had had in the long chair, he crossed to a pile of dusty papers that rose three feet from the floor, and, picking up a bundle tied with red tape, carried it to the desk.

"I wonder," he muttered, as he turned over page after page. "I wonder if that old tale is true. If ever Cranfield married—if a daughter *were* born whom as yet no one has ever seen! Surely there'll be some record, some note by a former D.O.!"

The sun set. Dusk gave place to the onward sweep of night. A sentry brought a lamp, which he placed on Aird's desk. The puny light cast weird shadows in the room. Still Aird searched on. The pile on the floor was less—scarcely six inches high. The air was hot, stifling. Aird fingered the corner of a sheet, his brow puckered in a frown. The stillness of night lay over the station, though soon revelry would be at its height. Just for the moment, stillness—peace.

Suddenly there came the most vivid flash of lightning he had ever seen and the most terrific clap of thunder he had ever heard. The paper slipped from Aird's hand. In conjunction with others it fell, and they were scattered about the floor.

Aird grumbled annoyance and stooped to pick them up. As he did so he slipped. To save a fall he put out a hand; the unexamined papers gave way under the sudden pressure; they slithered, and in their turn scattered over the floor with a rustling noise which yet just failed to drown the sound of a tiny thud. Aird heard it, and his eyes sought the floor, sought and were held by something bright, which, lying a little way apart from the papers, winked up at him from the dark well-worn boards.

For a long minute he gazed at the winking brightness, then slowly stooped down again and picked it up.

It lay on his desk beside the lamp, a thing of shining brilliance and delicate beauty, the exquisitely carved half of a silver buckle. Beside it lay a sheet of formal-looking paper, an ancient district register of marriage, the top right-hand corner of which was torn.

Aird's eyes travelled as if by instinct from the half buckle to the register. No word or movement escaped him as he read :

Cranfield, John Edward, bachelor, and underneath, Martin, Mary Enid, spinster.

In silence he read on, tracing with his forefinger the various columns that were ruled across the page, till at the extreme right he came to one headed "Nationality". Then at last a sigh escaped him as his finger came to an abrupt stop, pointing to the word "British" written twice.

Through the open window the moonlight warred with the yellow flame of the hurricane lantern. From the smooth waters of the bay a cooling breeze had sprung up. Suddenly Aird realized that the hour was late, that he was tired, that with the settling of the old gnawing doubt reaction had come, that he had neither bathed nor dined. With an abrupt gesture he looked at his watch ; the hands pointed to nearly seven o'clock.

Picking up the half buckle and torn register he passed out of the office, subconsciously answering the sentry's smart salute, and climbed the hill leading to his house. When near the top the heavy notes of the office gong flung him once again into the present with a duty which he must perform. As district officer he must be present, if only for a brief while, at the forthcoming native dance.

The riddle, nearly solved, intrigued him ; his eyes brightened, for he realized to the full what the possibilities of his discovery might be.

Aird looked round at the sea of faces that circled the small patch of earth doing duty as a stage—men's faces

that glistened bright with sweat, out of which shone dark, fanatical eyes ; women's faces, painted white with lime, now smudged unevenly into unsightly blotches, yet which made startling contrasts to eyes alluring, sensuous, slumbrous, made bright as stars by a secret native juice ; children's faces, panting with excitement, yet heavy with sleep.

He was about to raise his hand as a signal that the dance must finish for the night, when, with startling suddenness, the beating of the gongs ceased and a strange hush, tempered only by the sighing of the breeze, fell over all.

Aird turned to speak to the native sergeant who stood behind his chair ; but the sergeant stood dumb, transfixed as one in a trance, as the low sweet notes of some reed instrument came stealing over the night.

Nearer and nearer they came, yet strangely never growing louder ; nearer and nearer till, impelled as it were by some hypnotic power, the circle of squatting, silent natives opened, leaving a passageway twelve feet in width ; nearer and nearer, till into the circle of flickering lights, of smoking lamps and spluttering resin torches, stepped five robed figures clad from head to foot in white.

Spellbound, Aird watched. Though he could see nothing of their features he knew—some instinct divined—that they were women, though four were short as dwarfs, women of a different race.

The music ceased, and at a sign from her who, tall and graceful, held undisputed command, the others bowed four times in all, each time to a point of the compass, embracing the four corners of the earth. From the assembled natives a gasp of fear arose—fear of this all-pervading sign—then died as the sweet tones of the *kriedings* once again broke forth and the tall graceful figure began to dance.

Of that dance and what followed Aird had no clear recollection. He only knew that it seemed the epitome of all human emotion—hate and fear and greed and love ; that it expressed the naked soul of a woman, all womanhood since time began ; that from the eyes and knowledge of

that soul no secret in all the four corners of the earth was hid ; that it breathed power and omnipotence ; that he and all mankind were puppets against that will ; that it spelt Fatality, that what was written must inevitably be ; that plague and famine and wars, that health and plenty and peace were but satellites of woman's imperial will ; that just as woman was the mother of all life, so was she arbiter of all the world.

Fascinated, conscious yet curiously unconscious of his actual existence, Aird watched, and suddenly, as if recovered from a trance, he became aware that the dance was over and the music silent ; that the tall, graceful figure was standing poised on the points of her toes, her arms outstretched embracing the universe, the living embodiment of Eternal Enigma and Eternal Power.

He shivered and looked around him. The open ground was almost destitute of natives. One by one, overawed and fearful, they had crept away. Here and there he saw their figures disappearing among the shadows of the tall palms and native houses. He turned—even the sergeant was no longer present.

The lamps were smoking ; the torches guttering and feebly flickering in a rising breeze. From a cloudless sky a three-quarter moon shone down on the strange scene, bathing that solitary figure in its silver light.

A sudden gust of wind, stronger and sharper than its predecessors, sprang to life. It circled round that motionless form, and in its impish fancy caught the veils that swathed her head and shoulders till in an instant they went streaming up into the night. Just for a moment, the briefest possible space of time, her face remained uncovered, and Aird gazed upon the most beautiful woman he had ever seen.

She covered her face with her arms—a gesture graceful, regal, sad, and turned. Her four attendant dwarfs closed round her. The low notes of the *kriedings* once again pulsed on the still night air. Slowly, lightly, imperially she departed—and Aird found himself alone.

As one waking from a dream he pressed his hand

across his eyes. His heart was beating with great hammer blows ; the blood was surging through his veins. He rose from his chair, drawn by some deep emotion, to walk with unsteady gait and laboured breathing to the spot where the dancer had stood.

"God !" he whispered as he approached. "God ! She is the most lovely woman I have ever seen. Till now I've always scoffed at tales of love at first sight—but now—now—dear God, send her back to me !"

A tiny cloud approached the moon, covered it and passed upon its way. In the renewed brightness after the transitory gloom Aird saw something sparkling on the short dry grass. Silver to silver in the moonlight, it winked and caught his eye. Even before he picked it up he knew ; a great wonder and a great joy flooded his being.

He looked round. Not a soul in sight. Solitude ? Perhaps ; but the solitude of Love, for as the two halves of a silver buckle fitted into each other in his pocket, he felt as if it were his marriage night.

Aird looked at the sergeant and at the native chief who stood before him. The most cursory glance showed that the fear of the previous night was still upon them.

"Well ?" he questioned.

"Tuan," they both stammered, and got no further.

From their faces to the silver buckle in his hand, then back to their faces, his gaze travelled.

"Well ?" he persisted, disguising his burning curiosity under a show of frigid displeasure. "What have you to say—about last night ?"

"Tuan, Tuan," both began, but ceased at the raising of his hand.

"You, sergeant." Aird's voice was stern. "I could not find you. I looked behind my chair, but you had gone—scared by one woman and four dwarfs ! And you—Pangiran Piut—you fled as before a plague. You stand before me like two boys caught stealing eggs. What have you to say ?"

The eyes of the sergeant and the chief met. Each

shuffled nervously upon his feet ; then as with one breath they cried :

"It was the Spirit, Tuan, the Spirit of the Great White Death—and so we, who are men, were afraid because we know."

"Know what ?" Aird did not mean to put the question ; somehow against his will it slipped out. It was as if he were fencing for time, for in reality he knew to what the two referred. There were few men in Borneo with a greater knowledge of native law and beliefs than he, or who governed with a greater regard for native susceptibilities.

"Know what ?" he reiterated, as no answer was forthcoming ; but this time there was no sternness in his tone.

Piut stepped forward a couple of paces. By virtue of his rank he it was who should speak. His lips parted, but no sound came forth. Suddenly he pressed both hands to his breast. His body swayed. Aird jumped out of his chair ; the sergeant sprang towards him, but was too late to catch the rocking form which crashed upon its face.

Without a word the sergeant turned Piut upon his back. Aird gazed upon features distorted almost beyond recognition, then kneeling down he placed a hand upon his heart.

"Dead !" he muttered. "My God, he's dead ! Was it fear or——"

The last word was drowned by the booming notes of the office gong striking seven times. From the flagstaff the station flag was being broken. In the village and cluster of shops the people were stirring to the life of another day. From the barracks came the wails of a policeman's month-old baby. Then, as so often happens, there was a moment's silence ; and the eyes of Aird and the sergeant met. The sergeant saluted, turned to descend the hill to call four police. Aird entered another room that he might no longer see that distorted face and form already stiffening in death.

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For six months the epidemic ran its course. Single-handed Aird fought the cholera—fought, and in the end

won—won by the sheer magnetism of his personality and through the love the natives bore towards their Tuan Pegawei. Worn to a shadow, sleepless, hollow-eyed—travelling, ever travelling from village to village, and island to island, up rivers, over hills, through jungle and across plains, cajoling, commanding, beseeching, prosecuting, he fought with every ounce of his soul and body the arch-enemy, whose strength and subtlety he alone knew—fought and defeated the Great White Fear, which the sergeant and Piut had called the Great White Death—the curse of tropic lands which in cold north latitudes men name Fatalism.

And all the while a glad Te Deum was singing in his heart ; all the while memory travelled by his side, for he had met Love, and to him the road was clear. That tall graceful figure clad in white was no spirit of the Great White Death, but a living woman, a casket of human hopes and joys that he would one day find—and wed—who would help him rule the district, help him by her very fragrance and pure soul to kill beyond hope of resurrection the Great White Fear.

From the verandah of his bungalow Aird watched his people congregating to celebrate and give thanks for the end of the scourge. According to its beliefs and customs, each tribe and village would give thanks to its particular deity—to Allah, to Kinaringan, to the ruling spirits of the rivers and the sea. Then would follow a solemn presentation to him, the Tuan ; then sports, and in the evening and far into the night, a mighty dance.

From the contemplation of the scene he turned to an aged, wrinkled woman by his side—Pangiran Haji Alimah—grandmother of the dead Pangiran Piut.

"Well, Mother ?" he said. Between them, when alone, ceremonious address was always banished. They understood each other, and to Pangiran Alimah, Aird was as a son.

She took his right hand in both her wrinkled ones and carried it to her breast, to her forehead. Then, gently releasing it, folded both her own upon her breast.

"It is well, Tuan," she answered. "Yet I am afraid. I love the Tuan, and of my love see deeper than many, and so I am afraid because . . ." She paused.

"Because?" Aird questioned.

A smile of inexpressible sadness passed over Pangiran Alimah's face as she turned away from Aird and gazed towards the distant corner of the bay, where the sharp lines of Serip's Cave broke the merging blues of sky and sea.

"Because, Mother?" Aird gently repeated.

She turned, and lifting a small leather satchel that hung by a string of camel's hair round her neck to her lips, answered:

"Because the Tuan of the wisdom and knowledge of the white man is not content, but ever seeks and digs and probes. To the Tuan there is no such thing as the Great White Fear; but I who am old and have made the pilgrimage know. My eyes are dim, their beauty is no more, their sparkle dead; yet, Tuan, they see deep into the future, whose pages are not those of a sealed book. For all things are written; it is ever so. The cholera is fled, but it will come again. In the bowels of the earth, in the depth of the sea, on the breath of the wind it lurks and hides. At the appointed time it will come forth again and the White Spirit with the four attendant dwarfs once more appear, and she who the Tuan seeks and loves shall be his ruin. And so I am afraid."

Aird's hands were gripping the sides of his chair; his eyes were riveted on Pangiran Alimah's face.

"You mean?" he whispered.

"Only that I can see into the Tuan's heart. Throughout the cholera he has sung, and a light—the light of love—has been in his eyes. The White Spirit, which is no spirit at all, but a woman of flesh and blood, has him in her toils, and we for whom he toiled and whom he loved will count no more."

"Pangiran!" The cry was wrung from Aird, but Pangiran Haji Alimah went on:

"She lives, Tuan, over there among the caves of Serip's rocks," her wrinkled forefinger pointing to the distant

cape, "and she is evil. She desecrates the holy spot, knowing that none dare turn her out, for the rocks mark the spot where the boat bearing the Serip's remains came to anchor at the setting of the sun, where next morning no boat rocked longer on the tide's ebb and flow, but in its place rose up out of the sea the holy rocks, symbol of man's puny efforts to climb to heaven."

"You say, Pangiran, that she—she lives." Aird could not speak for the emotion that was tearing at his heart.

Again Pangiran Alimah smiled, and again the smile was sad.

"Tuan," she said, "is it not even as I have said? Is not the Tuan's heart beating but for her?"

"But—but——" he gasped.

"And she is as beautiful as she is bad." The aged voice was low but strong. "As wise as she is evil, trading on ignorance and beliefs. To all except to me she is a spirit—the Spirit of the Great White Death, that stalks the land instilling in the people the Great White Fear. But I who am old and have made the pilgrimage, know. She steals and lives upon the offerings and alms of the Tuan's people to the Serip. Tuan, I know, I, Pangiran Haji Alimah binti Pangiran Haji Mahomed, know, yet I will not, cannot, speak—because in the days gone by I nursed her, the daughter of Tuan Cranfield and the unknown mem-sahib whom he took to his side. A daughter of sin, she is cursed and pays."

Aird, risen from his chair, stood towering over the aged, wrinkled woman. His upraised hand was clenched, his face a frozen mask of anger, yet Pangiran Haji Alimah did not flinch.

On the garden path outside sounded the heavy tread of boots. The native sergeant swung into view. Aird sat down slowly. A cold sweat broke out on his forehead as, waiting the sergeant's approach, he realized how near he had been to striking a woman.

Breathlessly, silently, Aird waited, his rifle resting lightly in his hands, his body tense with expectation, his

eyes alight with the zest of a hunter. He was alone—he always hunted alone, leaving his boys in camp. For two days he had followed the spoor—tracks of unusual size and deepness—and now by a curious chance the deer had doubled on its tracks. Nearer and nearer it came, a magnificent stag, the spread of whose antlers caused Aird to gasp. At that short range—a hundred yards—he could not miss the broad chest or forehead.

He raised his rifle; the butt settled surely in his shoulder; his finger curved round the trigger, curved and pressed, pressed slowly, inexorably. A flash, a report, a puff of smoke. Aird ran to the spot where the deer had stood when it dropped; yet when he got there it was gone. He looked around; the spoor was faint, for the ground was hard and stony. His ear caught the slight sound of snapping twigs. He followed. A little way and the bushes were here and there splashed with blood. A little farther and blood stained the ground; the hoof-marks grew uneven.

Aird quickened his pace as excitement rose. The bloodstains grew in size and number; here and there a rock or a bush was smeared. Aird followed hot-foot, exalted. Those antlers on his wall—the biggest he had ever seen, the whole majestic head, a trophy worthy of recall, the end of a glorious, laborious hunt!

Suddenly the jungle lessened, the light grew and a strange sound reached his ears—a restless, never-ending sound—the sound of sea swelling and rolling round rocks. Involuntarily Aird paused, looked round and listened. As he did so the sound of weeping broke the deep noise of the sea. Without a thought Aird ran forward, blindly obeying the instinct of his race. The stag must wait. Someone—a woman—was weeping, was in trouble; all else must wait. The sound of the sea grew nearer and the jungle thinned. He turned a corner of the tract, and then stood still.

Before a cave knelt a woman robed in white, whose flaming hair hung around her like a golden cloak. The massive antlers of a mighty stag arched over her head like the candles of an altar arch above the Holy Cross. The big brown head, with eyes now glazed in death, was held

to her breast. Two arms of purest white encircled the long, graceful neck. The light of love and pity and horror was in her eyes from which the tears were flowing on the sad brown face.

Aird looked. He could not speak or move. He only trembled. There before him knelt the Spirit of the Great White Death. Death was in her arms—the arms of the woman he loved with the madness of his race and faith—the arms of the woman who had danced that night—the daughter of Cranfield—daughter of sin, who therefore was accursed and paid. . . .

Their eyes met.

Her arms released their hold upon the dead stag. Slowly the great head slid to her knees, to the ground, to fall with a tiny thud. Aird shivered. On her white robe splashes of blood appeared, the mighty antlers had torn through the fabric and pierced her slender form. Her blood! Aird shivered again. She was the Spirit of the Great White Death—and she had clasped death in her arms—death which he had dealt—death which had led him to her at her home on Serip's Cave.

She rose to her feet, her arms held rigidly to her sides—a symbol of eternal stillness—death—her flaming golden hair a mantle to her long white robe backed by the blue of the endless sky and sea. Eternal Enigma: Woman—Eternal Power: Death.

"You—thief!"

Aird started. The words, spoken in English though with a faint Malay intonation, were biting and clear, yet withal were of a timbre that set his heart beating fast, more from love than surprise. There was a quality of richness, of conscious pride, which spoke of breeding and race, that found an immediate echo in his own heart.

Without a thought he raised his soft felt hat and with bowed head stood speechless before her.

"You—brute!"

Again she spoke; again Aird kept silent. Then with a flood of tears she fell across the dead stag's body, murmuring words of endearment.

The setting sun, about to sink behind the ocean's rim, cast a blood-red shaft of light across her prostrate form. It lengthened till it reached the spot where Aird stood immovable, and bathed him, too, in its crimson light. Its dying flame held no warmth, yet seemed to scorch the two, awakening them to consciousness.

She raised her head, her body to her knees. Aird moved towards her.

"Death," she murmured. "Death! Its blood-red flame reaches you too—you who have just dealt death. Why, why did you do it? Was there no other deer, no pig, within your reach, Tuan Aird—but you must slay my soul?"

Aird stumbled; a stone caught in his boot caused him to trip. She put out a hand. He grasped it in his own and raised it to his lips.

"Forgive!" he whispered. "Oh, my love, my love, forgive!"

He drew closer. Slowly she rose to her feet and swayed towards him. One arm, white as the purest alabaster, crept round his neck. He bowed his head. Over the stag's stiff body, cold in death, their warm lips met.

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The sweet music of the *kriedings* filled the cave—distant yet near, pervading yet not persistent. Aird, reclining on a sky-blue mattress, resting against a pile of cushions, looked meditatively at the smouldering end of his last cigarette. From this alone he knew how many days had passed since unconsciously he had found himself on Serip's Cave.

Five days! His strict ration, when hunting, of ten cigarettes a day now finished! Five days of . . . The rustling of a curtain of dried seaweed reached him. He raised his eyes and Cranfield's daughter stood before him, and the music of the *kriedings* ceased.

"Beloved." The murmur of the sea was in her voice.

He struggled to his feet, but in a swirl of gold and white she reached his side, pressing him back upon the

cushions, covering him with her flaming hair, stifling the murmured words with her kisses.

Through a deep embrasure in the rock wall the light of a full moon streamed. As the blood-red sun had scorched them, so now the cold silver light seemed pregnant with a chilly breath. The woman shivered and crept closer yet to Aird.

"Beloved, and all you say is true?" she whispered.

"True—all true—as true as . . ." Aird was going to say "death", but checked himself in time.

"As?" She looked him in the eyes.

"As that I love you, Saiang," he quietly answered, stroking her head of flame-gold hair.

"And you have seen the register—read the words?"

Aird nodded.

"There is no need for me longer to live accursed, despised by white and brown—a daughter of sin and shame—a harbinger of death—my hand against all men—my soul in chains—trading on superstition as the Spirit of the Great White Death—no need?"

"None." Aird spoke the word with all the force at his command. Then he pointed to the silver buckle which she wore, which he had given her, the two halves of which he had found.

"Look, Saiang," he continued. "Look, the lost halves are one, locked in a strong embrace, the complement of each other, making a union perfect in design, unsullied, pure. There is no need, dear heart, for you to be ashamed, I swear."

"And you will take me to your house across the bay, let me sail you there in what I call my phantom boat, *Berballen*? And show me all? And you will keep me with you—me, an untamed child—a daughter of the wild—and—and our little children, born of the sun and moon and sea, shall one day clamber on your knees in a gabled house in England, far, far across the sea? You swear, beloved?"

Her eyes held his and at her gaze he trembled—trembled with a man's overwhelming primitive desire, for in her eyes was the glad, ever-willing surrender,

woman's transcendent gift which, being omnipotent, is yet the ruin of the world.

"I swear."

In the hush of night, in the depth of the Serip's Cave, cradled in the waters of the Sphinx-like China Sea, the words, though softly spoken, seemed like a clarion call.

Aird closed his eyes. Some things there are men dare not see. He shivered. Cramp seized his calves. He stretched his legs, and the sudden pain wrung from him a cry. Two arms stole round his neck; cool feet caressed his own, burning and on fire. Breath, fragrant as the perfume of the flowers, fanned his hot forehead. Close to his body a form, yielding, delicious, alluring, nestled. Two lips parted and breathed the word "Beloved", then found his in an age-long, momentary kiss.

The moon rode on in an almost starless sky. The dawn of another day broke to the murmur of the sea and the slow, languorous rhythm of the *kriedings*. And Death—the Great White Death itself—met and wrestled with a woman's love.

The phantom boat *Berballen*, flying Aird's flag, drew nearer and nearer to the shore. In its stern, propped up among pillows, his head resting on his love's lap, Mervyn lay weakly. Worn to a shadow, his body a skeleton clothed in skin, with eyes that seemed sunk into the middle of his head, he greedily yet faintly drank in the warmth of the glorious sun. He stirred. With the quickness of a streak of summer lightning Saiang's hand found his: her full red lips pressed closely, lightly, against his, ridged and purple-black and drawn.

"My love." Her voice was as a mermaid's breath, fragrant and faint, yet full of the murmur of the sea.

Aird smiled weakly and turned his head. Her eyes aflame with shameless love, held his, and once again their lips met.

The boat drew nearer to the shore, whence came the sound of gongs and chanting. Out of the houses, down to the wharf, streamed a laughing crowd of happy people.

Only Pangiran Haji Alimah binti Pangiran Haji Mahomed remained on shore—alone in her house. She knew, and she was afraid. The wind was lessening, and its faint breath grew cold—cold as Death. The phantom boat was *bethantu* (haunted); the woman of Serip's Cave accursed; the Tuan Pegawei had forgotten his people.

The boat drew nearer, riding so lightly and mysteriously upon the water that it left no wake. The sail flapped in the lessening breeze, flapped and hung still, yet *Berballen* glided on and nearer, till her gunwale almost scraped the timbers of the wharf.

A mighty shout went ringing to the sky, cloudless and blue, yet somehow pitiless in its immeasurable immensity.

"The Tuan, the Tuan! The Tuan has come back at last. Allah is wonderful! Allah be praised!"

Pangiran Haji Alimah heard the cries and a twisted smile crept over her aged face as she waited.

Then came the realization of her fears.

The cries of joy turned to cries of wonder, of surprise, of disappointment, then of fear. The sail filled faintly, as a breeze stirred bearing an odour of decay and death. *Berballen* glided on, on past the wharf, on and out to sea, where on the horizon, faint yet definite and foreboding, dark clouds were scudding, gathering, growing larger, nearer.

Berballen glided on. Mervyn neither moved nor spoke. The woman looked at him. Then she understood, and a great cry of anguish rent the air. Love was dead. But in its death Love triumphed, for it killed the Great White Fear.

The woman took Mervyn in her arms, straining his cold tortured body to her own, warm and glowing. But Death made no response.

The boat was gathering speed, the wind was freshening and the clouds coming up apace. The people on the wharf were silent, amazed. Then they fell upon their knees and covered their eyes as two figures balanced for one dizzy moment on the gunwale of the haunted boat. . . .

Then the storm broke and *Berballen* was no more.

THE BLACK STONE

ROBERT E. HOWARD

THE BLACK STONE

They say foul beings of Old Times still lurk
In dark forgotten corners of the world,
And Gates still gape to loose, on certain nights,
Shapes pent in hell.

—JUSTIN GEOFFREY:

I READ of it first in the strange book of Von Junzt, the German eccentric who lived so curiously and died in such grisly and mysterious fashion. It was my fortune to have access to his *Nameless Cults* in the original edition, the so-called Black Book, published in Düsseldorf in 1839, shortly before a hounding doom overtook the author. Collectors of rare literature are familiar with *Nameless Cults* mainly through the cheap and faulty translation which was pirated in London by Bridewall in 1845, and the carefully expurgated edition put out by the Golden Goblin Press of New York in 1909. But the volume I stumbled upon was one of the unexpurgated German copies, with heavy leather covers and rusty iron hasps. I doubt if there are more than half a dozen such volumes in the entire world to-day, for the quantity issued was not great, and when the manner of the author's demise was bruited about, many possessors of the book burned their volumes in panic.

Von Junzt spent his entire life (1795-1840) delving into forbidden subjects; he travelled in all parts of the world, gained entrance into innumerable secret societies, and read countless little-known and esoteric books and manuscripts in the original; and in the chapters of the Black Book, which range from startling clarity of exposition to murky ambiguity, there are statements and hints to freeze the blood of a thinking man. Reading

what Von Junzt *dared* put in print arouses uneasy speculations as to what it was that he dared *not* tell. What dark matters, for instance, were contained in those closely-written pages that formed the unpublished manuscript on which he worked unceasingly for months before his death, and which lay torn and scattered all over the floor of the locked and bolted chamber in which Von Junzt was found dead with the marks of taloned fingers on his throat? It will never be known, for the author's closest friend, the Frenchman Alexis Ladeau, after having spent a whole night piecing the fragments together and reading what was written, burnt them to ashes and cut his own throat with a razor.

But the contents of the published matter are shudder-some enough, even if one accepts the general view that they but represent the ravings of a madman. There, among strange things, I found mention of the Black Stone, that curious, sinister monolith that broods among the mountains of Hungary, and about which so many dark legends cluster. Von Junzt did not devote much space to it—the bulk of his grim work concerns cults and objects of dark worship which, he maintained, existed in his day, and it would seem that the Black Stone represents some order or being lost and forgotten centuries ago. But he spoke of it as one of the *keys*—a phrase used many times by him, in various relations, and constituting one of the obscurities of his work. And he hinted briefly at curious sights to be seen about the monolith on Midsummer's night. He mentioned Otto Dostmann's theory that this monolith was a remnant of the Hunnish invasion and had been erected to commemorate a victory of Attila over the Goths. Von Junzt contradicted this assertion without giving any refutory facts, merely remarking that to attribute the origin of the Black Stone to the Huns was as logical as assuming that William the Conqueror reared Stonehenge.

This implication of enormous antiquity piqued my interest immensely, and after some difficulty I succeeded in locating a rat-eaten and mouldering copy of Dostmann's

Remnants of Lost Empires (Berlin, 1809, Der Drachenhäus Press). I was disappointed to find that Dostmann referred to the Black Stone even more briefly than had Von Juntz, dismissing it with a few lines as an artifact comparatively modern in contrast with the Græco-Roman ruins of Asia Minor, which were his pet theme. He admitted his inability to make out the defaced characters on the monolith, but pronounced them unmistakably Mongoloid. However, little as I learned from Dostmann, he did mention the name of the village adjacent to the Black Stone—Stregoicavar—an ominous name, meaning something like Witch-Town.

A close scrutiny of guidebooks and travel articles gave me no further information—Stregoicavar, not on any map that I could find, lay in a wild, little-frequented region, out of the path of casual tourists. But I did find subject for thought in Dornly's *Magyar Folklore*. In his chapter on "Dream Myths" he mentions the Black Stone and tells of some curious superstitions regarding it—especially the belief that if anyone sleeps in the vicinity of the monolith, that person will be haunted by monstrous nightmares for ever after; and he cited tales of the peasants regarding too-curious people who ventured to visit the Stone on Midsummer night and who died raving mad because of *something* they saw there.

That was all I could gleam from Dornly, but my interest was even more intensely aroused as I sensed a distinctly sinister aura about the Stone. The suggestion of dark antiquity, the recurrent hint of unnatural events on Midsummer night, touched some slumbering instinct in my being, as one senses, rather than hears, the flowing of some dark subterraneous river in the night.

And I suddenly saw a connection between this Stone and a certain weird and fantastic poem written by the mad poet, Justin Geoffrey: "The People of the Monolith." Inquiries led to the information that Geoffrey had indeed written that poem while travelling in Hungary, and I could not doubt that the Black Stone was the very monolith to which he referred in his strange verse. Reading his

stanzas again, I felt once more the strange dim stirrings of subconscious promptings that I had noticed when first reading of the Stone.

I had been casting about for a place to spend a short vacation, and I made up my mind. I went to Stregoicavar. A train of obsolete style carried me from Temesvar to within striking distance, at least, of my objective, and a three days' ride in a jouncing coach brought me to the little village, which lay in a fertile valley high up in the fir-clad mountains. The journey itself was uneventful, but during the first day we passed the old battlefield of Schomvaal where the brave Polish-Hungarian knight, Count Boris Vladinoff, made his gallant and futile stand against the victorious hosts of Suleiman the Magnificent, when the Grand Turk swept over Eastern Europe in 1526.

The driver of the coach pointed out to me a great heap of crumbling stones on a hill near by, under which, he said, the bones of the brave Count lay. I remembered a passage from Larson's *Turkish Wars*: "After the skirmish" (in which the Count with his small army had beaten back the Turkish advance-guard) "the Count was standing beneath the half-ruined walls of the old castle on the hill, giving orders as to the disposition of his forces, when an aide brought to him a small lacquered case which had been taken from the body of the famous Turkish scribe and historian, Selim Bahadur, who had fallen in the fight. The Count took therefrom a roll of parchment and began to read, but he had not read far before he turned very pale, and without saying a word replaced the parchment in the case and thrust the case into his cloak. At that very instant a hidden Turkish battery suddenly opened fire, and the balls striking the old castle, the Hungarians were horrified to see the walls crash down in ruin, completely covering the brave Count. Without a leader the gallant little army was cut to pieces, and in the war-swept years which followed the bones of the nobleman were never recovered. To-day the natives point out a huge and mouldering pile of ruins near Schomvaal,

beneath which, they say, still rests all that the centuries have left of Count Boris Vladinoff."

I found the village of Stregoicavar a dreamy, drowsy little place that apparently belied its sinister cognomen—a forgotten back-eddy that Progress had passed by. The quaint houses and the quainter dress and manners of the people were those of an earlier century. They were friendly, mildly curious but not inquisitive, though visitors from the outside world were extremely rare.

"Ten years ago another American came here and stayed a few days in the village," said the owner of the tavern where I had put up, "a young fellow and queer-acting—mumbled to himself—a poet, I think."

I knew he must mean Justin Goeffrey.

"Yes, he was a poet," I answered, "and he wrote a poem about a bit of scenery near this very village."

"Indeed?" Mine host's interest was aroused. "Then, since all great poets are strange in their speech and actions, he must have achieved great fame, for his act and conversations were the strangest of any man ever knew."

"As is usual with artists," I answered, "most of his recognition has come since his death."

"He is dead, then?"

"He died screaming in a madhouse five years ago."

"Too bad, too bad," sighed mine host sympathetically. "Poor lad—he looked too long at the Black Stone."

My heart gave a leap, but I masked my keen interest and said casually, "I have heard something of this Black Stone; somewhere near this village, is it not?"

"Nearer than Christian folk wish," he responded. "Look!" He drew me to a latticed window and pointed up at the fir-clad slopes of the brooding blue mountains. "There, beyond where you see the bare face of that jutting cliff, stands that accursed Stone. Would that it were ground to powder and the powder flung into the Danube to be carried to the deepest ocean! Once men tried to destroy the thing, but each man who laid hammer or maul against it came to an evil end. So now the people shun it."

"What is there so evil about it?" I asked curiously.

"It is a demon-haunted thing," he answered uneasily, and with the suggestion of a shudder. "In my childhood I knew a young man who came up from below and laughed at our traditions—in his foolhardiness he went to the Stone one Midsummer night and at dawn stumbled into the village again, stricken dumb and mad. Something had shattered his brain and sealed his lips, for until the day of his death, which came soon after, he spoke only to utter terrible blasphemies or to slaver gibberish.

"My own nephew when very small was lost in the mountains and slept in the woods near the Stone, and now in his manhood he is tortured by foul dreams, so that at times he makes the night hideous with his screams and wakes with cold sweat upon him.

"But let us talk of something else, Herr; it is not good to dwell upon such things."

I remarked on the evident age of the tavern, and he answered with pride: "The foundations are more than four hundred years old; the original house was the only one in the village which was not burned to the ground when Suleiman's devils swept through the mountains. Here, in the house that then stood on these same foundations, it is said, the scribe Selim Bahadur had his headquarters while ravaging the country hereabouts."

I learned then that the present inhabitants of Stregoi-cavar are not descendants of the people who dwelt there before the Turkish raid of 1526. The victorious Moslems left no living human in the village or the vicinity thereabouts, when they passed over. Men, women, and children they wiped out in one red holocaust of murder, leaving a vast stretch of country silent and utterly deserted. The present people of Stregoi-cavar are descended from hardy settlers from the lower valleys who came into the upper levels and rebuilt the ruined village after the Turk was thrust back.

Mine host did not speak of the extermination of the original inhabitants with any great resentment, and I learned that his ancestors in the lower levels had looked

on the mountaineers with even more hatred and aversion than they regarded the Turks. He was rather vague regarding the causes of this feud, but said that the original inhabitants of Stregoicavar had been in the habit of making stealthy raids on the lowlands and stealing girls and children. Moreover, he said that they were not exactly of the same blood as his own people; the sturdy, original Magyar-Slavic stock had mixed and intermarried with a degraded aboriginal race until the breed had blended, producing an unsavoury amalgamation. Who these aborigines were he had not the slightest idea, but maintained that they were "pagans" and had dwelt in the mountains since time immemorial, before the coming of the conquering peoples.

I attached little importance to this tale; seeing in it merely a parallel to the amalgamation of Celtic tribes with Mediterranean aborigines in the Galloway hills, with the resultant mixed race which, as Picts, has such an extensive part in Scotch legendry. Time has a curiously foreshortening effect on folklore, and just as tales of the Picts became intertwined with legends of an older Mongoloid race, so that eventually the Picts were ascribed the repulsive appearance of the squat primitives, whose individuality merged, in the telling, into Pictish tales, and was forgotten; so, I felt, the supposed inhuman attributes of the first villagers of Stregoicavar could be traced to older, outworn myths with invading Huns and Mongols.

The morning after my arrival I received directions from my host, who gave them worriedly, and set out to find the Black Stone. A few hours' tramp up the fir-covered slopes brought me to the face of the rugged, solid stone cliff which jutted boldly from the mountain-side. A narrow trail wound up it, and mounting this, I looked out over the peaceful valley of Stregoicavar, which seemed to drowse, guarded on either hand by the great blue mountains. No huts or any sign of human tenancy showed between the cliff whereon I stood and the village.

I saw numbers of scattered farms in the valley, but all lay on the other side of Stregoicavar, which itself seemed to shrink from the brooding slopes which masked the Black Stone.

The summit of the cliffs proved to be a sort of thickly-wooded plateau. I made my way through the dense growth for a short distance and came into a wide glade ; and in the centre of the glade reared a gaunt figure of black stone.

It was octagonal in shape, some sixteen feet in height and about a foot and a half thick. It had once evidently been highly polished, but now the surface was thickly dented as if savage efforts had been made to demolish it ; but the hammers had done little more than to flake off small bits of stone and mutilate the characters which once had evidently marched in a spiraling line round and round the shaft to the top. Up to ten feet from the base these characters were almost completely blotted out, so that it was very difficult to trace their direction. Higher up they were plainer, and I managed to squirm part of the way up the shaft and scan them at close range. All were more or less defaced, but I was positive that they symbolized no language now remembered on the face of the earth. I am fairly familiar with all hieroglyphics known to researchers and philologists, and I can say with certainty that those characters were like nothing of which I have ever read or heard. The nearest approach to them that I ever saw were some crude scratches on a gigantic and strangely symmetrical rock in a lost valley of Yucatan. I remember that when I pointed out these marks to the archæologist who was my companion, he maintained that they either represented natural weathering or the idle scratching of some Indian. To my theory that the rock was really the base of a long-vanished column he merely laughed, calling my attention to the dimensions of it, which suggested, if it were built with any natural rules of architectural symmetry, a column a thousand feet high. But I was not convinced.

I will not say that the characters on the Black Stone

were similar to those on that colossal rock in Yucatan ; but one suggested the other. As to the substance of the monolith, again I was baffled. The stone of which it was composed was a dully gleaming black, whose surface, where it was not dented and roughened, created a curious illusion of semi-transparency.

I spent most of the morning there and came away baffled. No connection of the Stone with any other artifact in the world suggested itself to me. It was as if the monolith had been reared by alien hands, in an age distant and apart from human ken.

I returned to the village with my interest in no way abated. Now that I had seen the curious thing, my desire was still more keenly whetted to investigate the matter further and seek to learn by what strange hands and for what strange purpose the Black Stone had been reared in the long ago.

I sought out the tavern-keeper's nephew and questioned him in regard to his dreams, but he was vague, though willing to oblige. He did not mind discussing them, but was unable to describe them with any clarity. Though he dreamed the same dreams repeatedly, and though they were hideously vivid at the time, they left no distinct impression on his waking mind. He remembered them only as chaotic nightmares through which huge whirling fires shot lurid tongues of flame and a black drum bellowed incessantly. One thing only he clearly remembered—in one dream he had seen the Black Stone, not on a mountain slope but set like a spire on a colossal black castle.

As for the rest of the villagers I found them not inclined to talk about the Stone, with the exception of the schoolmaster, a man of surprising education, who spent much more of his time out in the world than any of the rest.

He was much interested in what I told him of Von Junzt's remarks about the Stone, and warmly agreed with the German author in the alleged age of the monolith. He believed that a coven had once existed in the vicinity, and that possibly all of the original villagers had been

members of that fertility cult which once threatened to undermine European civilization and gave rise to the tales of witchcraft. He cited the very name of the village to prove his point; it had not been originally named Stregoicavar, he said; according to legends the builders had called it Xuthltan, which was the aboriginal name of the site on which the village had been built many centuries ago.

This fact roused again an indescribable feeling of uneasiness. The barbarous name did not suggest connection with any Scythic, Slavic, or Mongolian race to which an aboriginal people of these mountains would, under natural circumstances, have belonged.

That the Magyars and Slavs of the lower valleys believed the original inhabitants of the village to be members of the witchcraft cult was evident, the schoolmaster said, by the name they gave it, which name continued to be used even after the older settlers had been massacred by the Turks, and the village rebuilt by a cleaner and more wholesome breed.

He did not believe that the members of the cult erected the monolith, but he did believe that they used it as a centre of their activities, and, repeating vague legends which had been handed down since before the Turkish invasion, he advanced the theory that the degenerate villagers had used it as a sort of altar on which they offered human sacrifices, using as victims the girls and babies stolen from his own ancestors in the lower valleys.

He discounted the myths of weird events on Midsummer night as well as a curious legend of a strange deity which the witch-people of Xuthltan were said to have invoked with chants and wild rituals of flagellation and slaughter.

He had never visited the Stone on Midsummer night, he said, but he would not fear to do so; whatever *had* existed or taken place there in the past, had been long engulfed in the mists of time and oblivion. The Black Stone had lost its meaning save as a link to a dead and dusty past.

It was while returning from a visit with this school-master one night about a week after my arrival at Stregoicavar that a sudden recollection struck me—it was Midsummer night! The very time that the legends linked with grisly implications to the Black Stone. I turned away from the tavern and strode swiftly through the village. Stregoicavar lay silent; the villagers retired early. I saw no one as I passed rapidly out of the village and up into the firs which masked the mountain slopes with whispering darkness. A broad silver moon hung above the valley, flooding the crags and slopes in a weird light and etching the shadows blackly. No wind blew through the firs, but a mysterious intangible rustling and whispering was abroad. Surely on such nights in past centuries, my whimsical imagination told me, naked witches astride magic broomsticks had flown across this valley, pursued by jeering demoniac familiars.

I came to the cliffs, and was somewhat disquieted to note that the illusive moonlight lent them a subtle appearance I had not noticed before—in the weird light they appeared less like natural cliffs and more like the ruins of Cyclopean and Titan-reared battlements jutting from the mountain slope.

Shaking off this hallucination with difficulty I came upon the plateau, and hesitated a moment before I plunged into the brooding darkness of the woods. A sort of breathless tenseness hung over the shadows, like an unseen monster holding its breath lest it scare away its prey.

I shook off the sensation—a natural one, considering the eeriness of the place and its evil reputation—and made my way through the wood, experiencing a most unpleasant sensation that I was being followed, and halting once, sure that something clammy and unstable had brushed against my face in the darkness.

I came out into the glade and saw the tall monolith rearing its gaunt height above the sward. At the edge of the woods on the side towards the cliffs was a stone which formed a sort of natural seat. I sat down, reflecting that

it was probably while there that the mad poet, Justin Geoffrey, had written his fantastic *People of the Monolith*. Mine host thought that it was the Stone which had caused Geoffrey's insanity, but the seeds of madness had been sown in the poet's brain long before he ever came to Stregoicavar.

A glance at my watch showed that the hour of midnight was close at hand. I leaned back, waiting whatever ghostly demonstration might appear. A thin night wind started up among the branches of the firs, with an uncanny suggestion of faint, unseen pipes whispering an eerie and evil tune. The monotony of the sound and my steady gazing at the monolith produced a sort of self-hypnosis upon me; I grew drowsy. I fought this feeling, but sleep stole on me in spite of myself; the monolith seemed to sway and dance, strangely distorted to my gaze, and then I slept.

I opened my eyes and sought to rise, but lay still, as if an icy hand gripped me helpless. Cold terror stole over me. The glade was no longer deserted. It was thronged by a silent crowd of strange people, and my distended eyed took in strange barbaric details of costume which my reason told me were archaic and forgotten even in this backward land. Surely, I thought, these are villagers who have come here to hold some fantastic conclave—but another glance told me that these people were not of the folk of Stregoicavar. They were a shorter, more squat race, whose brows were lower, whose faces were broader and duller. Some had Slavic or Magyar features, but those features were degraded as from a mixture of some baser alien strain I could not classify. Many wore the hides of wild beasts, and their whole appearance, both men and women, was one of sensual brutishness. They terrified and repelled me, but they gave me no heed. They formed in a vast half-circle in front of the monolith and began a sort of chant, flinging their arms in unison and weaving their bodies rythmically from the waist upward. All eyes were fixed on the top of the Stone, which

they seemed to be invoking. But the strangest of all was the dimness of their voices; not fifty yards from me hundreds of men and women were unmistakably lifting their voices in a wild chant, yet those voices came to me in a faint indistinguishable murmur as if from across vast leagues of space—or *time*.

Before the monolith stood a sort of brazier from which a vile, nauseous yellow smoke billowed upward, curling curiously in an undulating spiral around the black shaft, like a vast unstable serpent.

One one side of this brazier lay two figures—a young girl, stark naked and bound hand and foot, and an infant, apparently only a few months old. On the other side of the brazier squatted a hideous old hag with a queer sort of black drum on her lap; this drum she beat with slow light blows of her open palms, but I could not hear the sound.

The rhythm of the swaying bodies grew faster, and into the space between the people and the monolith sprang a naked young woman, her eyes blazing, her long black hair flying loose. Spinning dizzily on her toes, she whirled across the open space and fell prostrate before the Stone, where she lay motionless. The next instant a fantastic figure followed her—a man from whose waist hung a goat-skin, and whose features were entirely hidden by a sort of mask made from a huge wolf's head, so that he looked like a monstrous nightmare being, horribly compounded of elements both human and bestial. In his hand he held a bunch of long fir switches bound together at the larger ends, and the moonlight glinted on a chain of heavy gold looped about his neck. A smaller chain depending from it suggested a pendant of some sort, but this was missing.

The people tossed their arms violently, and seemed to redouble their shouts as this grotesque creature loped across the open space with many a fantastic leap and caper. Coming to the woman who lay before the monolith, he began to lash her with the switches he bore, and she leaped up and spun into the wild mazes of the most

incredible dance I have ever seen. And her tormentor danced with her, keeping the wild rhythm, matching her every whirl and bound, while incessantly raining cruel blows on her naked body. And at every blow he shouted a single word, over and over, and all the people shouted it back. I could see the working of their lips, and now the faint far-off murmur of their voices merged and blended into one distant shout, repeated over and over with slobbering ecstasy. But what that one word was I could not make out.

In dizzy whirls spun the wild dancers, while the lookers-on, standing still in their tracks, followed the rhythm of their dance with swaying bodies and weaving arms. Madness grew in the eyes of the capering votaress, and was reflected in the eyes of the watchers. Wilder and more extravagant grew the whirling frenzy of that mad dance—it became a bestial and obscene thing, while the old hag howled and battered the drum like a crazy woman, and the switches cracked out a devil's tune.

Blood trickled down the dancer's limbs, but she seemed not to feel the lashing save as a stimulus for further enormities of outrageous motion; bounding into the midst of the yellow smoke which now spread out tenuous tentacles to embrace both flying figures, she seemed to merge with that foul fog and veil herself with it. Then emerging into plain view, closely followed by the beast-thing that flogged her, she shot into an indescribable, explosive burst of dynamic mad motion, and on the very crest of that mad wave she dropped suddenly to the sward, quivering and panting as if completely overcome by her frenzied exertions. The lashing continued with unabated violence and intensity, and she began to wriggle toward the monolith on her belly. The priest—or such I will call him—followed, lashing her unprotected body with all the power of his arm as she writhed along, leaving a heavy track of blood on the trampled earth. She reached the monolith, and, gasping and panting, flung both arms about it and covered the

cold stone with fierce hot kisses, as in frenzied and unholy adoration.

The fantastic priest bounded high in the air, flinging away the red-dabbled switches, and the worshippers, howling and foaming at the mouths, turned on each other with tooth and nail, rending one another's garments and flesh in a blind passion of bestiality. The priest swept up the infant with a long arm, and shouting again that name, whirled the wailing babe high in the air and dashed its brains out against the monolith, leaving a ghastly stain on the black surface. Cold with horror I saw him rip the tiny body open with his bare brutish fingers and fling handfuls of blood on the shaft, then toss the red and torn shape into the brazier, extinguishing flame and smoke in a crimson rain, while the maddened brutes behind him howled over and over that name. Then suddenly they all fell prostrate, writhing like snakes, while the priest flung wide his gory hands as in triumph. I opened my mouth to scream my horror and loathing, but only a dry rattle sounded; a huge monstrous toad-like *thing* squatted on the top of the monolith!

I saw its bloated, repulsive and unstable outline against the moonlight, and set in what would have been the face of a natural creature, its huge, blinking eyes which reflected all the lust, abysmal greed, obscene cruelty and monstrous evil that has stalked the sons of men since their ancestors mowed blind and hairless in the tree-tops. In those grisly eyes were mirrored all the unholy things and vile secrets that sleep in the cities under the sea, and that skulk from the light of day in the blackness of primordial caverns. And so that ghastly thing that the unhallowed ritual of cruelty and sadism and blood had evoked from the silence of the hills, leered and blinked down on its bestial worshippers, who grovelled in abhorrent abasement before it.

Now the beast-masked priest lifted the bound and weakly writhing girl in his brutish hands and held her up towards that horror on the monolith. And as that monstrosity sucked in its breath, lustfully and slobberingly,

something snapped in my brain and I fell into a merciful faint.

I opened my eyes on a still white dawn. All the events of the night rushed back on me and I sprang up, then stared about me in amazement. The monolith brooded gaunt and silent above the sward which waved, green and untrampled, in the morning breeze. A few quick strides took me across the glade; here had the dancers leaped and bounded until the ground should have been trampled bare, and here had the votaress wriggled her painful way to the Stone, streaming blood on the earth. But no drop of crimson showed on the uncrushed sward. I looked shudderingly at the side of the monolith against which the bestial priest had brained the stolen baby—but no dark stain nor grisly clot showed there.

A dream! It had been a wild nightmare—or else—I shrugged my shoulders. What vivid clarity for a dream!

I returned quietly to the village and entered the inn without being seen. And there I sat meditating over the strange events of the night. More and more was I prone to discard the dream theory. That what I had seen was illusion and without material substance, was evident. But I believed that I had looked on the mirrored shadow of a deed perpetrated in ghastly actuality in bygone days. But how was I to know? What proof to show that my vision had been a gathering of foul spectres rather than a mere nightmare originating in my own brain?

As if for answer a name flashed into my mind—Selim Bahadur! According to legend this man, who had been a soldier as well as a scribe, had commanded that part of Suleiman's army which had devastated Stregoicavar; it seemed logical enough; and if so, he had gone straight from the blotted-out countryside to the bloody field of Schomvaal, and his doom. I sprang up with a sudden shout—that manuscript which was taken from the Turk's body, and which Count Boris shuddered over—might it not contain some narration of what the conquering Turks found in Stregoicavar? What else could have

shaken the iron nerves of the Polish adventurer? And since the bones of the Count had never been recovered, what more certain than that the lacquered case, with its mysterious contents, still lay hidden beneath the ruins that covered Boris Vladinoff? I began packing my bag with fierce haste.

Three days later found me ensconced in a little village a few miles from the old battlefield, and when the moon rose I was working with savage intensity on the great pile of crumbling stone that crowned the hill. It was back-breaking toil—looking back now I cannot see how I accomplished it, though I laboured without a pause from moonrise to dawn. Just as the sun was coming up I tore aside the last tangle of stones and looked on all that was mortal of Count Boris Vladinoff—only a few pitiful fragments of crumbling bone—and among them, crushed out of all original shape, lay a case whose lacquered surface had kept it from complete decay through the centuries.

I seized it with frenzied eagerness, and piling back some of the stones on the bones I hurried away; for I did not care to be discovered by the suspicious peasants in an act of apparent desecration.

Back in my tavern chamber I opened the case and found the parchment comparatively intact; and there was something else in the case—a small squat object wrapped in silk. I was wild to plumb the secrets of those yellowed pages, but weariness forbade me. Since leaving Stregoicavar I had hardly slept at all, and the terrific exertions of the previous night combined to overcome me. In spite of myself I was forced to stretch myself on my bed, nor did I awake until sundown.

I snatched a hasty supper, and then in the light of a flickering candle, I set myself to read the neat Turkish characters that covered the parchment. It was difficult work, for I am not deeply versed in the language, and the archaic style of the narrative baffled me. But as I toiled through it a word or a phrase here and there leaped at me,

and a dimly growing horror shook me in its grip. I bent my energies fiercely to the task, and as the tale grew clearer and took more tangible form my blood chilled in my veins, my hair stood up, and my tongue clove to my mouth. All external things partook of the grisly madness of that infernal manuscript, until the night sounds of insects and creatures in the woods took the form of ghastly murmurings and stealthy treadings of ghoulish horrors, and the sighing of the night wind changed to tittering obscene gloating of evil over the souls of men.

At last, when the grey dawn was stealing through the latticed window, I laid down the manuscript and took up and unwrapped the thing in the bit of silk. Staring at it with haggard eyes I knew the truth of the matter was clinched, even had it been possible to doubt the veracity of that terrible manuscript.

And I replaced both obscene things in the case, nor did I rest or sleep or eat until that case containing them had been weighted with stones and flung into the deepest current of the Danube, which, God grant, carried them back into the hell from which they came.

It was no dream I dreamed on Midsummer midnight in the hills above Stregoicavar. Well for Justin Geoffrey that he tarried there only in the sunlight and went his way, for had he gazed upon that ghastly conclave his mad brain would have snapped before it did. How my own reason held I do not know.

No—it was no dream—I gazed upon a foul rout of votaries long dead, come up from hell to worship as of old; ghosts that bowed before a ghost. For hell has long claimed their hideous god. Long, long he dwelt among the hills, a brain-shattering vestige of an outworn age, but no longer his obscene talons clutch for the souls of living men, and his kingdom is a dead kingdom, peopled only by the ghosts of those who served him in his lifetime and theirs.

By what foul alchemy or godless sorcery the gates of hell are opened on that one eerie night I do not know,

but mine own eyes have seen. And I know I looked on no living thing that night, for the manuscript written in the careful hand of Selim Bahadur narrated at length what he and his raiders found in the valley of Stregoi-cavar; and I read, set down in detail, the blasphemous obscenities that torture wrung from the lips of screaming worshippers; and I read, too, of the lost grim black cavern high in the hills where the horrified Turks hemmed a monstrous, bloated, wallowing toad-like being and slew it with flame and ancient steel blessed in old times by Mohammed, and with incantations that were old when Arabia was young. And even staunch old Selim's hand shook as he recorded the cataclysmic, earth-shaking death-howls of the monstrosity, which died not alone; for a half-score of his slayers perished with him in ways that Selim would not, or could not, describe.

And the squat idol carved of gold and wrapped in silk was an image of *himself*, and Selim tore it from the golden chain that looped the neck of the slain high priest of the mask.

Well that the Turks swept that foul valley with torch and cleanly steel! Such sights as those brooding mountains have looked on belong to the darkness and abysses of lost æons. No—it is not fear of the toad-thing that makes me shudder in the night. He is made fast in hell with his nauseous horde, freed only for an hour on the most weird night of the year, as I have seen. And of his worshippers, none remain.

But it is the realization that such things once crouched beast-like above the souls of men which brings cold sweat to my brow; and I fear to peer again into the leaves of Von Junzt's abomination. For now I understand his repeated phrase of *keys*!—aye! *Keys to Outer Doors*—links with an abhorrent past and—who knows?—of abhorrent spheres of the *present*. And I understand why the cliffs look like battlements in the moonlight, and why the tavern-keeper's nightmare-haunted nephew saw in his dream the black stone like a spire on a Cyclopean black castle. If men ever excavate among those mountains

they may find incredible things below those masking slopes. For the cave wherein the Turks trapped the—*thing*—was not truly a cavern, and I shudder to contemplate the gigantic gulf of æons which must stretch between this age and the time when the earth shook herself and reared up, like a wave, those blue mountains that, rising, enveloped unthinkable things. May no man ever seek to uproot that ghastly spire men call the Black Stone!

A key! Aye, it is a key, symbol of a forgotten horror. That horror has faded into the limbo from which it crawled, loathsomely, in the black dawn of the earth. But what of the other fiendish possibilities hinted at by Von Juntz—what of the monstrous hand which strangled out his life? Since reading what Selim Bahadur wrote, I can no longer doubt anything in the Black Book. Man was not always master of the earth—and *is he now?*

And the thought recurs to me—if such a monstrous entity as the Master of the Monolith somehow survived its own unspeakably distant epoch so long—*what nameless shapes may even now lurk in the dark places of the world?*

THE GHOST THAT NEVER DIED

ELIZABETH SHELDON

THE GHOST THAT NEVER DIED

I SUPPOSE few people will believe the story of Miriam Tromley's death and its sequel, even to-day. That is why I have never told of the strange things I had seen, either at the inquest or afterwards. I might have confessed it to the police, shrieked it aloud on Broadway. Who would have believed me then? But the time is not far off when the world will know that such things can be.

I was Evelyn's stenographer for three years. It was a queer job. I guess old Parton, whose name adorned the title-page of the magazine, hardly knew how he came to be an editor. It had started as a sort of advertisement bulletin for his cereals and tinned foods; then Miriam Tromley came to be his secretary. She had been an editor on a woman's magazine. She was a nervous little woman with all sorts of half-baked talents, and the first thing old Parton knew she had turned his biscuit literature into a magazine.

The magazine—*Mother and Child*, you must remember it!—grew larger and thicker until it needed another worker in the editorial department. Miriam Tromley had a friend who, according to her own tale, was in the hardest kind of ill-luck at the time, and she convinced stingy old Parton that *Mother and Child* needed her afflicted friend's services. That friend was Evelyn Renard. This all happened about a year before they took me on. When I arrived on the scene, Evelyn had been promoted from assistant to co-editor. When I went in answer to their advertisement for a stenographer it was Evelyn Renard who interviewed me. I remember so well my first impression of her. She seemed to have risen hastily as I entered, and stood at her desk ill at ease, although I was only a prospective stenographer. I felt as if she had

hurriedly concealed something as I entered. I do not mean this literally—it was just the impression of something furtive about the woman herself. When you were in the room with her she did not look at you, she *watched* you like an animal ready to anticipate the movements of its enemy.

Evelyn had not a single point of beauty unless it was her too-bright dark eyes, but she had a sort of feverish gaiety and seemed to attract certain types of men. She was almost always pleasant with the people in the office, yet I always felt something reptilian about her, and, strange to say, she had a liking for snakes instead of the repulsion most of us feel for them.

I always felt sorry for Miriam Tromley. She seemed the sort of woman that needs protection. She ought to have been married. She was not pretty and she lacked repose, a frail, faded little woman, neither young nor old. Sometimes she looked decidedly pretty. She knew twice as much as her co-editor, but she lacked assurance; whereas Evelyn Renard was a raw, shameless and brilliant faker. No one knew anything about her antecedents. She laid claim to a millionaire French-Canadian father who had lost his money in disastrous speculations.

She engaged me at an unusually small salary, but I was not in a position to be particular just then. I afterwards learned that Evelyn had done some very efficient work reducing the salaries of the entire staff after her promotion, although she always attributed this policy to some hard-hearted power above her.

For a time I lost sight of my first disagreeable impression of her, for Evelyn, as I have said, was friendly with all the office employees, and she told such pathetic stories about herself that everyone pitied her. Even hard old Parton made her work as easy as possible, while Miriam Tromley, who had an income of her own, was always responding to some dire need of Evelyn's, and incidentally spent hours doing Evelyn's work—for which she received scant thanks.

Old Parton had had rather a fancy for Miriam Tromley at the start. At the time Evelyn appeared upon the

scene, Miss Sampson says, they all thought he would marry her, but after Evelyn came Miriam's influence declined. She made him believe that Miriam was inefficient. It did not come about too quickly. Miriam never suspected, but no one else was much surprised when Evelyn Renard was put over her. Evelyn was then editor-in-chief. When that happened we could all prophesy the next step, which would, of course, be the total exit of Miriam.

We all knew it but Miriam. She seemed restless and a little anxious at times, but whatever she may have feared she was never suspicious of Evelyn.

"Miss Tromley doesn't need the money," Miss Sampson said to me one day, "but she likes the work here. She's one of those restless women. I think the poor soul will get quite melancholy if Evelyn pries her out of her job altogether."

By that time I had begun to lose my sympathy with our afflicted employer. She worked us too hard, and I had seen too much of the inner workings of office politics.

"She'll make a grand political boss when women really get their teeth into politics," said Miss Simpson the day we uncovered the maternity corset graft that was going on on the woman's page.

One day when Miss Renard was ill I went to her apartment to take some dictation, and afterwards she got talking. She said she was lonely. I think she was afraid to be alone. Anyway, she indulged in some of the wildest flights of fancy I ever heard from a sane person.

"One day, Miss Morton," she said, "I went into my room and saw myself lying on the bed. Now what do you think of that?"

I thought at the time, "My dear madam, I'd hate to tell you what I think of it!" And I remembered my first impression that there was something uncanny about Evelyn Renard.

There was a young man named Chalmers around her in those days. I am sure I don't know what he saw in

Evelyn. Perhaps it was only that her apartment was a place where he could lounge and talk and eat. Chalmers was a babbling sort of youth. People wouldn't take him seriously for some reason, yet he was in a way a genius who did not know how to make any practical use of his gifts. But Evelyn knew how to use them. Oh yes! He furnished her with the material for all the articles she wrote. I don't believe Evelyn ever had an idea in her life. I don't think she *wanted* to have one. She preferred to use her neighbour's. She liked the idea of having other people do her work for her.

It was from poor Chalmers that Evelyn got her great idea that turned *Mother and Child* into the biggest money-making proposition in the publishing business.

There were other ideas, too, that he let fall into the hothouse soil of Evelyn's mind in his loose incessant babbling.

"Some crook will make a lot of money that way some day," I heard him say once, and I noted the radiant furtiveness of Evelyn's eyes as she listened. I could almost hear her think, "I'll be that one!" I remembered that look last autumn when I heard of the palatial apartment she had purchased in a co-operative apartment building on Fifth Avenue. By a curious coincidence I saw Chalmers the same day looking as if he had definitely come down to the park bench plane of existence.

The next month came the exposure of the maternity corset. Of course Evelyn contrived to keep her skirts clear of it. I don't know how much old Parton was on to the mechanism of it, but as the office boy says, I was "wise to it" from the beginning, and I don't believe Evelyn ever knew that I knew. If she did, what a fool she must have thought me not to have blackmailed her out of a good income with my knowledge! That is what *she* would have done in my place.

Occasionally I used to catch glimpses of Miriam Tromley looking worried and anchorless, coming in and out of the office. She had not been able to get another position. She used to come in to see Evelyn at times

when she knew old Parton would be out. Evelyn had succeeded in making a complete breach between them. At the same time she sympathized ardently with Miriam for the injustice that had been done to her.

"Men are like that," I heard her say one day in accents of bitter sympathy to Miriam. "The more you do for them the more they expect. You poor dear! You worked yourself to death for old Parton and this is what you get for it."

I have never known just the nature of the crooked deal that Evelyn put over. It was an opportunity that came to her in some way through the office. Some dishonourable use that she made of inside information. She covered her tracks to the end. The trouble came because she began to be afraid that Miriam knew about it, and, as a result, to be haunted by the fear of exposure.

Miriam had come in one day while Evelyn was having a conference with an advertising man. She was obliged to go with the man into another office, leaving Miriam alone beside her desk with her papers spread out on top of it.

I think that was the beginning of her suspicion that Miriam knew what she was up to, although I knew that Miss Tromley was incapable of reading other people's letters. But Evelyn, like many people who do such things themselves, was ready to suspect others of her own proclivities.

From that day on I could see that Evelyn was afraid of Miriam. Later I knew that she hated her. I imagine that people like Evelyn Renard always hate those who have given them their start, especially when *they* have done their benefactor an injury in return.

Of course there was something in those papers that Evelyn had reason to be very nervous about. I had known for some time that she had papers which she kept locked up as if she were in the secret service.

One afternoon after leaving the office I found that I had left behind a pile of manuscripts I had to read, and I went back to get them.

As I opened the door of Miss Renard's office I distinctly saw her at her desk drawing out a paper from a drawer that she always kept locked.

"Why, Miss Renard, I thought you had left long ago!" I exclaimed. As I walked in I knocked against a pile of books and papers on the corner of a desk and they began to fall to the floor. I bent to pick them up, and when I rose again—about the space of two seconds—Miss Renard was gone. She must have slipped out at the other door, but how she managed it so noiselessly I don't know.

I told her about it the next day, and while I was telling it I noticed a curious sort of glitter in her eyes—snake-like, I called it to myself. She dismissed me and my anecdote a little shortly.

"You were day-dreaming, Miss Morton; I was in a suburban train on my way to Rye at that time yesterday, and asleep at that. I nearly went past my station."

As it happened I had proof afterwards that she had told me the truth, for Miss Sampson, who lives at Mount Vernon, was on the same train, but all the same I felt sure that Evelyn Renard was living some sort of double life, for I saw some queer goings on in those days.

For one thing, I felt sure that she "shadowed" Miriam Tromley. Miriam had finally found an advertising position of some sort, and did not come in so often. When she did, Evelyn's dread was most apparent. There was certainly something that she was terribly afraid to have Miriam find out. Twice after dark I saw her following Miriam, always at a little distance behind her, and walking more noiselessly than you would believe a human being could walk.

One day when Miriam had left the office I caught Evelyn looking after her with an expression that actually made me shiver. She must have noticed the look on my face, for she quietly rearranged her features and said with the sweetest tone of false sympathy—one I had come to know so well:

"Dear Miss Tromley is not looking so well. Haven't you noticed it? I am really troubled about her."

I muttered that I hadn't noticed it especially, and as our eyes met I knew with a sense of chill along my spine that the editor of *Mother and Child* wished that her former benefactor was dead.

The next day I overheard part of a conversation between them that seemed rather to give reality to Evelyn's fears, which I had taken to be just the imaginary alarms of a guilty conscience.

"You are making a mistake, Evelyn," I heard Miriam say, "and if I can't make you see it I will have to take some other means of stopping it."

Then Evelyn's voice, rasping and hard, "Go ahead—I don't care! You needn't think that *you* can down me——"

That was all I heard, but enough to know that Miriam seemed to be threatening some sort of exposure, and that Evelyn's mood was determined and defiant.

I did not know what it was about then. Afterwards I was able to make a shrewd guess.

The next day was the strangest of my life. Afterwards I wondered if I had lost my reason temporarily, if I had suffered from delusions, but now I understand. . . . I will tell it exactly as it happened.

In the first place it leaked out—as such things usually do—that Evelyn had hooked old Parton. They were to be married quietly the next day. It had long been a betting proposition in the office, with the odds on Evelyn's side. At least, all the women except the new flapper stenographer had bet on her.

Just before five o'clock Miriam called to see Evelyn and was refused. The editor's door was closed to all visitors. Something in the make-up had to be changed at the last minute, and Evelyn had ordered her dinner sent in. She was going to work until she was through, she said, and short of a bomb explosion or fire in the

building—so she instructed the night operator—no one was to knock on her door.

As I stood inside the street entrance pursuing an elusive nickel in the depths of my bag, and capturing only innumerable pennies, I caught sight of the dismissed Miriam hanging indecisively on the outskirts of the crowd hurrying subway-wards. I remembered afterwards her bewildered disconsolate expression, and, what I had not realized before, the peculiar indecision, the marked weakness of the face. It occurred to me that she had in some way depended upon Evelyn's hard selfish strength, and that without her she was rudderless, like a lost dog without its master.

Just as I had captured my nickel and started to go, the elevator came down and I saw Evelyn—supposedly locked up in her office at work, slip out and pass silently out to the street.

It did not surprise me. I think I always expected Evelyn to have some different purpose from the one she openly owned up to, and I should have thought nothing of it if it had not been for Miriam's strange treatment of her.

Evelyn walked directly up to Miriam, but Miriam simply stared straight into her face and walked past as if she were not there at all. I don't mean that Miriam *cut* her, but that she looked—or seemed to look—directly at the spot where Evelyn stood without seeing her. Certainly Miriam must be in some disturbed state of mind for such absent-mindedness to be possible when faced by the very person she had come to see!

Miriam turned towards Fifth Avenue; Evelyn followed at a short distance, and, my curiosity and apprehension now thoroughly awake, I followed them both.

Evelyn did not make any effort to overtake Miriam. She slipped quietly after her through the crowd in an eel-like way she had, so close behind I marvelled that Miriam never once saw her. She *did* seem to have some sense of being followed. Twice she turned and looked back, but—I remembered afterwards—although the second

time she caught sight of *me* and bowed, she never once saw Evelyn.

I followed them all the way to Miriam's apartment in Greenwich Village. She lived in a sort of studio building, an old house with dark winding halls. And never once during that strange walk did Miriam discover that Evelyn was following her. Never once did Evelyn discover *me*!

At the door of her apartment Miriam paused to let herself in, while Evelyn drew back into the shadow.

I waited farther back, near the stairs. It was not long before Miriam came out again—to go to her dinner, perhaps, or to get something to cook at home. I saw Evelyn creep nearer. There was only a dim gas-jet burning far down the hall; otherwise the place was almost dark.

As Miriam stood in the doorway of her room, a pathetic little silhouette against the light, at last Evelyn went openly up to her and spoke. At least I *thought* she spoke, although I heard no sound. Miriam turned to look at her vaguely . . . without surprise. Evelyn seemed to be urging her to do something, and Miriam listened with her eyes cast down like one in thought, but she did not answer.

After a moment she turned back into her room, and noiselessly Evelyn slipped through the door after her, close on her heels.

They left it open. I stood on the threshold of Miriam's apartment, uneasy and irresolute, watching them. Still without speaking, Miriam went to the bathroom, turned on the light, took a small bottle from the medicine cabinet and picked up a glass, while silent Evelyn watched. I could see it all from where I stood. And still neither of them spoke, only the place seemed filled with the electric pulsations of Evelyn's *will*.

I saw Miriam pour the contents of the vial into a glass; then for the moment she seemed to hesitate, and in that interval Miriam seemed to grow vague and weak, while Evelyn became strong, *tall*, terrific. . . . She was

advising Miriam, but it was advice that was more like a threat or a command. Even then I did not suspect. How could I have understood? I knew nothing of these things then . . . not until Miriam raised the glass to her lips—not until it fell from her nerveless fingers and I saw her turn with a dazed face, half falling into a chair, did I realize what the glass must have contained. . . .

She saw me then; she called my name. I jumped forward just in time to save her from falling, then turned to Evelyn just as she was escaping from the room. I sprang after her and caught her wrist, but it slipped from my grasp . . . something cool and light . . . not solid . . . yet cold, with a curious indescribable coldness. . . . For a long time I could feel the sensation of it, like menthol on my hand. Then I bent over Miriam—she was totally unconscious.

I found an art student in a neighbouring studio. We got the poor girl into her bed and telephoned for a doctor, but he was too late. It was cyanide, and death had been instantaneous.

And now I come to the strangest part of my story. After I got home that night about nine o'clock, I rang up Miss Wharton, Mr. Parton's secretary, to tell her of poor Miriam Tromley's death, and learned that she had gone back to Evelyn's apartment that night at eight o'clock—old Parton had sent her because he could get no answer from her telephone—and had found her in bed in charge of a trained nurse! The doctor had just left. It seemed that Evelyn had had some sort of a seizure while working alone in her office. Miss Wharton—who had not been employed in the office very long—found the case most pathetic.

"No one knows how long she had lain there unconscious, poor soul, all alone, with no one to come to her help! The watchman found her lying beside her desk. He noticed the light and went to investigate."

"The night watchman!" I repeated. "Do you know what time it was?"

"No, it wasn't the night watchman, it was James. He found her just before he left, and he leaves, doesn't he, at half past six?"

Half past six! The very hour of Miriam Tromley's death. For by a curious impulse I had glanced at my wrist-watch when the doctor had dropped Miriam's hand and pronounced her dead.

According to that, Evelyn Renard was in her own office at the very moment I had seen her leave Miriam Tromley's apartment forty blocks away!

Almost beside myself, I hung up the receiver without bidding Miss Wharton good-bye and went straight to Evelyn Renard's house and asked for the nurse. She looked a little curious when she saw my face. I think she thought that I was Evelyn's next-of-kin in a state of distraction.

"I can't imagine what brought on Miss Renard's attack," she said. "She seemed to be in a sort of trance when they found her. She must have been dead set on something, for her face was fixed with the look of a man in a death-grip. It was awful to see that look on her white unconscious face. Seemed like she must have been making some big mental drive and just dropped off after it like that."

"They found her about half past six?" I asked.

The nurse stared as if she found my question odd.

"So I understand," she said, and returned to her patient. I could hear her moaning faintly—rather a dreadful sound.

It was a fact, then, Evelyn *had* been in her own office in a fainting-fit at the very hour when I had seen her urging Miriam Tromley to take her own life!

The marriage was postponed for a time. Three days later Evelyn came back to the office. She went about looking so white and appealing that even the publicity manager pitied her.

"Poor girl, how she feels her friend's death!" he said.

I never told what I had seen. How could I have told

it in the face of the facts? With her own hand Miriam Tromley had lifted the glass of poison to her lips. Had I not seen her in the very act?

About a month afterwards Evelyn had what the doctors called a nervous breakdown—a breakdown with delusions. She told me one of them a few days before they took her away to the sanatorium. We were alone in the office.

I had just said to her, "You really ought to take a rest, Miss Renard. You are just keeping up on will-power."

And she had answered, "Perhaps I am. It is wonderful what one's will can do." She bent towards me like one telling a secret. "Did you know that you can make your will do things at a distance when you are asleep?"

"What do you mean?" I asked, controlling my impulse to draw back from her.

She leaned nearer with a look I didn't like to meet in her murky eyes. "Why, don't you know? You can go to bed at night and set your will to do something you want to accomplish—miles away—and it will do the thing for you, just as if you were there. Sometimes you can half remember it afterwards . . . like a dream."

I remembered that conversation afterwards . . . when old Parton died.

Evelyn did not stay long in the sanatorium. In two weeks she was back in the office completely restored.

Miriam Tromley had not been dead a month when Evelyn Renard became Evelyn Parton. Summer was approaching. Of course she gave up her job at the office, although she playfully remarked she should always keep her eye on it—and she did.

Mr. and Mrs. Parton sailed on the newest highest-priced steamer for Europe in June. That was the last we ever saw of old Parton. He died suddenly in an obscure town in Italy, leaving Evelyn his sole heir. She was now sole owner of the business, not to speak of all that it had made.

I feel dreadfully about old Parton's death. How can

I do otherwise? If I had told what I had seen it might have saved his life.

He had walked off an upper balcony in his sleep, so they told us. . . . But who had urged him out there . . . a useless old encumbrance now that his will was made and his fortune safely within Evelyn's grasp?

I can see a dark shadowy figure behind old Parton, softly urging him over the brink—a spirit you might call it, a ghost that never died. "Ghosts of the living," the Japanese call them, the soul sent out in sleep. Is not sleep Death's sister? Evelyn had concentrated upon Miriam's death, willing her to self-destruction. Sometimes it is known as astral murder.

It would appear to be the perfect crime, wouldn't it; evidence upon which no jury would convict? But Evelyn's career did not end with Miriam Tromley, or even with old Parton.

It seemed for a time as if nothing could stop Evelyn. Strange that little Blanche O'Hara should have been the one.

Blanche was MacDonough's private secretary. MacDonough was our business manager and a very keen man. I am sure he never cared for Evelyn, although of course he was far from guessing what she really was. He was fond of Blanche, whether fond enough to marry her one couldn't tell, but at least his favour made Blanche a person of some consequence, and Evelyn had always feared discovery—strange mixture that she was of iron will and cowardice.

She never dreamed that I suspected her—luckily for me—or I should have gone the way of poor Miriam and old Parton. But for some reason her apprehensions and suspicions fastened upon Blanche. Evelyn more or less took charge of the business after old Parton died. She never had an office in the building, but at least once in the day she would drop in on us—of course at the time she thought she was least expected; and quite often if MacDonough was out, or really busy, this brought her in touch with Blanche.

I don't believe Blanche had the faintest suspicion of what Evelyn was like. She was a frank, straightforward child, with great, clear, rather light-blue eyes. Though light, they were very striking, because her eyelashes were long and dark like her hair. They were rather uncanny eyes, and she had a way of fixing them upon you and leaving them there. She was probably thinking of something else when she did it—most likely MacDonough—but she certainly made you feel as if she was reading your innermost thoughts, piercing your very soul. It would have been a hard thing to lie to Blanche. I could see that her eyes got on Evelyn's nerves. She would do anything rather than meet them.

Blanche was a good kid, clean straight through. Like the heroine in the old-fashioned melodrama, she was the sole support of a widowed mother. But she was not sentimental about it, never made capital out of it, or regretted the necessity to go without little feminine vanities because of it.

It seems that I was predestined to the rôle of on-looker, for I was the sole witness of that momentous last meeting between Evelyn and Blanche.

It was one of those warmish days in winter when New York offices seem unbearably hot. Evelyn had dropped in at noon when she knew MacDonough would be out. That made me curious to start with, because I knew it meant that this time, instead of avoiding, she wanted to see, Blanche. MacDonough did quite a bit of business at luncheon, and consequently was often absent for a long time at that hour. While he was out Blanche was obliged to be in. Of course, Evelyn knew that.

The first thing Evelyn did when she entered was to ask to have the window wide open. It was I who had ushered her in, and I remained near the doorway frankly watching. For some reason Evelyn thought me of no account. She never seemed to notice my comings or goings.

Blanche went to the window and threw it all the way

up. Evelyn stole up behind her like a shadow. She never seemed to walk so that we heard her, and she almost always dressed in black. Evelyn leaned against the right-hand side of the window-ledge; Blanche was at the left. -

"What a perfectly gorgeous day!" Blanche said, and leaned out, drawing in long breaths.

"What a view from this window!" Evelyn answered. "Why, all those buildings are on Long Island! I wonder what that tall tower is?"

She pointed to something real or imaginary so far to the north that Blanche had to lean quite far out to see it. The window-ledge was rather low, and it made me nervous to see Blanche do it. I don't know what it was that suddenly made me look from Blanche to Evelyn.

No, Evelyn had no intention of pushing her out, not with her hands. But if you could have seen her eyes! Never, so long as I live, shall I forget them—a snake's eyes sending out live fires of hatred—hatred and something else. . . .

I knew what it was. It was the thing that must be in a snake's eyes when it is charming the dove to its death.

Farther and farther little Blanche leaned out; a scream rose to my lips; I made a dart forward; then, sharply, Blanche drew in and turned her eyes upon Evelyn. And under her eyes Evelyn seemed to shrink and withdraw within herself, as if, like the demon in a fairy-story, she was going to vanish. But she did not vanish. She stood staring, staring at Blanche, straight into those wide, clear, pure blue eyes.

It was the strangest thing I have ever seen. From her evil murky eyes Evelyn was sending out something, something that was a veritable missile of death, sending it straight into Blanche's eyes. For a moment she was able to send it as a writhing snake may spit out venom in its last hour. But the thing that she sent could not reach its victim. From that clear light it rebounded

back to its source, straight into the evil soul that lay behind Evelyn's dark eyes. A boomerang !

She made a wild movement, like a creature shot. Blanche screamed. For a second, a dark thing outflung against the sky . . . then silence. Twenty stories below Evelyn Parton lay on the sidewalk, broken beyond recognition, in the midst of the wild panic of the passers-by.

Miriam Tromley was timid and neurotic, Parton was a feeble old man. But Blanche, young, strong, clean of soul, was not vulnerable to Evelyn's evil power, which, deflected from its target, rebounded upon her who sent it, forcing her to the suicidal act she had tried to will Blanche to perform.

When MacDonough married Blanche he took new offices in another building, for never afterwards could Blanche bear to go into that room. I think, little as she sensed what had happened there, she did realize that she had been very close to the great force of evil in that place.

BEHIND THE BLINDS

FLAVIA RICHARDSON

BEHIND THE BLINDS

JOAN MORGAN sat at the bed-sitting-room window and looked across the intervening backyards to the row of windows facing her. The backs of Elvaston Road were fascinating, though she never quite knew why. Elvaston Road itself was a long street of large houses, now too big to be kept up in their entirety by the families that had formerly occupied them from attic to cellar. Most of them were private hotels; the one immediately opposite Joan's window had been divided into self-contained suites, euphemistically called flats by the house agent—in other words, "A family to every floor."

The second floor back had new tenants. Presumably they also inhabited the second floor front also, but the passion for economy of space always made it possible for the flats to be divided once again into flatlets or "American flats", the distinction of which seemed to be that the bed retreated into an alcove and hid there. Joan's own room had no alcove, and was therefore merely a "sunny bed-sitting-room with own gas-ring and use of bath".

The new second floor tenants had evidently only just moved in. Their lace curtains were new and hung stiffly in ungainly folds, as though they had not quite recovered from being packed. Joan watched idly, chiefly because she had nothing better to do, and because it was always amusing to see new people and their belongings.

Suddenly she stiffened, gasped, and instinctively put her hand on the window-sill for support. Yet nothing strange had happened. Only at the second floor window, the left-hand one next door to the private hotel, had appeared a face—a face so redolent with evil, so utterly wicked with the refinements of knowledge, that it made

her sick and terrified even to look at it. It was a woman—a woman who had once been handsome, perhaps even beautiful, yet now every feature was a bestial travesty of what it had been in its prime. The hair was plentifully streaked with grey, the neck was wrinkled and sagging, but the eyes were alive with ferocity and hate.

Joan shrank back as if she could be seen and harmed even from such a distance. For a moment the face looked out of the window. Then a hand, remarkably beautiful and slender, came up and pulled down the blind. For a moment the shadow lingered, then it disappeared, and the room was once more masked by an untouched oblong of light.

Joan shook herself and tried to throw off the uncomfortable feeling that assailed her. She got her supper mechanically, and found herself furtively looking from time to time out of the window, wondering if she would see that terrible face again. Nothing of the sort occurred. When she went to bed the light behind the blind had already been put out. When she got up in the morning the blind itself had been raised and the window was masked with the curtains.

That evening Joan found herself hurrying home from the office. She did not know what made her almost run from the bus, but a little later on she found herself, almost without distinct volition, sitting at the window waiting to see what would happen. The same thing took place. Again came that horrible feeling of terror, almost of paralysing sickness; again came the sight of the grey-haired woman, and the opening of the window before the drawing down of the blind.

Impelled by what force she did not know, Joan watched the same procedure night after night for a week. Then one evening she felt a strange urge. Instead of getting off the bus at the usual place and hurrying home, she went on a little farther and walked down Elvaston Road. She thought she knew the house by sight, but she found it more difficult to trace than she had expected. The fronts were all so different from the backs, and, at the

same time, it seemed impossible to count the numbers accurately. Baffled, she gave up the attempt and went home, looking at her watch as she did so. She reckoned that she would be too late for the episode of the blind.

Yet, almost as if it had been arranged specifically for her benefit, the same ritual took place just after her return to her room. This time it seemed to Joan that the woman smiled at her—an evil, horrible smile that yet held in it something of a lure.

Two nights later Joan found herself counting the backs of the houses, leaning out of the window to be accurate. She must know what the front of the house looked like. On the third day she went once more down Elvaston Road and checked the numbers until she came to the one she sought. Like the others, it was uninteresting, lacking in paint, with the stucco peeling away in small patches from the portico, and the five steps leading to the front door in need of overhauling.

Joan slipped furtively up the steps and looked at the little brass plates by the bells. Some of the occupants had not risen to the dignity or expense of brass, but had been content with visiting-cards or pieces of paper with name printed on them more or less efficiently. But the second floor bell remained untouched, unlabelled save for the distinguishing figure thoughtfully supplied by the landlord. Thus there was no clue.

A door opened somewhere upstairs. Joan heard the sound of a light tread. It filled her with sudden unreasoning panic. She fled down the steps, and as she hurried up the road it seemed to her that she heard the horrible throaty chuckle of a woman at her heels.

For several days after that, she gave Elvaston Road a wide berth, even going out of her way to avoid passing down it on her return from a shopping expedition. Yet every night found her at the window waiting for the ritual of the blind—and every night it came.

Then Fate took a hand and plunged her into the midst of things where she would never have gone in any other way.

"You live quite close to Elvaston Road, don't you, Miss Morgan?" asked her chief one morning, when he had finished dictating letters.

"Yes," Joan said, her heart beating unaccountably fast.

"I wonder if you would do me a favour on your way home to-night and leave this parcel for me at number thirty-two? It's a rather valuable glass vase that I'm sending to an old friend of mine who is a bit of an expert. There's a discussion about its actual value, and I don't like to trust it through the post, even if it is well packed."

"Of course." Joan spoke as quietly as she could.

"That's awfully good of you. I'll have it made into a parcel, and if you would come in and fetch it before you go, I'd be glad. There is no need to wait. My friend will arrange to get it back to me in a day or two, and he has promised to have someone in the flat to take it in."

Thirty-two, Elvaston Road. The number hummed in Joan's head all day. Was that the number of the mysterious house? She could not remember. How did the numbers run in Elvaston Road? Were they odd and even on either side, or did they run straight up one side and down the other? Curiously enough, no amount of concentration could bring to her mind the number of the one house that mattered; she could not even remember any particular house from which she might have counted.

The night was warm and mild for spring. The bulbs in the park were in flower, the young leaves on the trees had done more than just show in bud. The early daffodils showed touches of yellow where they were about to break their green sheaths. The earth seemed cool and fresh and friendly. It was with some reluctance that Joan Morgan got down from the bus and went along Elvaston Road. For a moment she even hesitated—wondered if she should go back to her own room and spend sixpence on bribing the landlady's little boy to

deliver the parcel. Then she shook her head. The vase was valuable—suppose any harm came to it? She could not confess that she had left it to someone else's charge.

Down Elvaston Road she walked, scanning the numbers with a growing anxiety as she got nearer and nearer to the fatal door. Then her heart gave a great throb, and she found herself impelled up the fatal steps. Mechanically she looked at the address on the label. Then her eyes sought the little plates that surmounted each bell. "A. Craven" lived on the third floor. Joan set her teeth. That meant she would have to pass the mysterious door of the second floor flat, not once but twice. Could she get up and come down without danger? She shuddered. Some unknown force terrified her. It seemed as if the mouth of the hall were a yawning monster, beckoning her in to her own destruction, grinning evilly as though aware that she could not refuse.

There was no help for it. Joan threw back her head, gripped the precious parcel more tightly under her arm and started up the stairs. "Perhaps," she romanced to herself, "perhaps Mr. Craven will be just going out. Perhaps we shall go down the stairs together. . . ." And all the time in her heart she knew that this was pure romance, that whatever happened she would have to find her own way through her adventure.

Moved by some curious instinct Joan tiptoed up the stairs. They were uncarpeted, just covered with worn and thin linoleum, and it seemed that however quietly she walked, every step was like the report of a gun. Yet it would be far worse to come down again—far worse.

As she went by the fatal doorway of the second floor she looked at it, fascinated, furtive. It remained serenely shut—one might have thought that it always remained shut, so quiet was the house. Yet only Joan knew that somehow, somewhere, behind that door lurked horror.

The third floor door gave out no such mysterious alarms. It was freshly painted, the knocker and handle were of gleaming brass, and the small additional bell

at the side was connected with a well-charged battery. Joan pressed it, and the "ping" seemed to echo through the whole of the flat. Almost before she had realized it the door was opened by an old-fashioned man-servant. He took the parcel from her, bowed his thanks and shut the door as she turned to go downstairs. The whole episode had taken only the fraction of a minute. Joan gasped. She realized now that she had still gone on romancing, hoping that if Mr. Craven himself were not going out that his man would see her down to the door at the foot of the stairs. Now she must go alone.

Treading on the sides of the stairs, remembering that according to the best detective stories the treads gave less sound at the sides than in the middle, Joan stealthily surmounted the first of the difficulties, the half-way turn. Then disaster overcame her. In her anxiety to creep successfully down the remainder of the steps and along the landing, she slipped, clutched at the banisters, missed them, and covered the last of the stairs in a recumbent position. And the noise . . .

Joan picked herself up as quickly as she could, feeling very foolish and remarkably thankful that she had not sprained her ankle. She was just brushing down her skirt when the door of the second floor flat was opened. On the threshold stood the woman of the blind. Her face was showing nothing but kind concern.

"You've had an accident?" she said. "I heard you slip, and was afraid that you had broken a bone."

"No, thank you," Joan said, rather flustered. "It was very silly of me. I must have caught my heel somehow in the linoleum."

"So uncomfortable and alarming. Won't you come in and rest for a moment or two? I am sure you must be suffering from shock."

Joan shook her head. "Really, I assure you it is nothing," she began, but found herself impelled almost without her own volition to step into the second floor flat. The woman closed the door. There was something so alarming and forbidding in the snap of the latch that

Joan almost turned and ran—yet she knew by some sixth sense that she would not be allowed to do so.

Again impelled more by understanding than by spoken word, she went down the narrow little passage to a room at the end—the room with the blind—the second floor back. The door was open. It seemed from the glimpse she caught as she went towards it, an ordinary enough room, cheerful, and furnished as a comfortable sitting-room. When she stepped into it she drew back almost with horror.

Sitting in a wheel-chair, evidently unable to use his lower limbs, was a man—the largest, fattest, most gross man she had ever seen. He was more than gross, he was horrible. His hair was snow-white, his skin pale and flaccid like that of a person who has not seen enough sun. His hands were fleshy and repulsive, with coarse yellow hairs on the fingers, which themselves were swollen and enlarged till they looked like great white caterpillars. They seemed to writhe, too, like caterpillars. His eyes were very blue and very keen, under the overhanging brows, from which all vestige of eyebrows seemed to have gone.

If this were the woman's husband, Joan felt she could understand the expression of hatred that came over her when she pulled down the blind. To be cooped up with this abnormality . . . yet was the woman herself more normal? Joan turned to look at her . . . and drew back for a moment, horrified at the expression she caught in the piercing eyes.

"This young lady has slipped on the stairs," said the woman. "I brought her in to rest for a moment. I'll make some tea."

"Do," said the man. His voice was high-pitched and thin, like the note of a reed instrument. There was something uncanny about this clear high note coming from that enormous body, sunk deep in the chair.

The woman turned and left the room before Joan could protest. Compelled by the blue eyes she took a chair, but felt as if she were poised on the edge of a

volcano. Nothing happened. No one spoke, yet the stillness and the silence were in themselves alarming. Something was wrong somewhere. Joan was not peculiarly sensitive; she had never considered herself especially subject to atmosphere, yet the atmosphere of that flat simply shrieked alarm, and fear, and horror. She tried to move, but felt as if she were hypnotized.

The kettle must have been on the stove in the kitchen, for scarcely three minutes elapsed before the woman came back with a tray in her hand. Joan watched her with care. She did not want to eat or drink in the strange flat, to which no one knew she had come. Yet it would be difficult to refuse. At least the tea was in the pot, not in the cups—yet . . . she hesitated, but dared not reject the cup that was passed to her first. And the others drank the tea without hesitation.

Nothing happened. The three of them sat there, quite still, and without a word being spoken. Joan suddenly felt that she would become hysterical, that she would laugh or giggle hopelessly. This was so utterly absurd, so unnatural.

"Too fat . . . too fat . . ." The man broke the silence with these strange irrelevant words. Joan stared at him, wondering what he meant. The woman merely shot him a glance from her bright eyes. She seemed to be quite unconcerned, almost expecting it. . . . Joan grew a little more afraid. At the worst, the pair of them seemed to be dangerous; at the best, they must be lunatics. She made a great effort and rose to her feet.

"Thank you so much for your hospitality," she said, and the words sounded forced and unnatural. "I must be getting back now."

"Won't you stay a little longer?" said the woman, and as she spoke she also got up. At the same time the old man manipulated the wheel-chair so that it was between Joan and the door. She saw the movement with a sinking fear. What did this mean? To get out of the room she would have to push past, to push out of

the way that horrible lump of flesh. Apart from the loathsomeness of touching it, she was very doubtful whether she would have the necessary strength.

"We shall be delighted to keep you as a guest for a little while." The woman spoke suavely, but there was a ferocious glint in her eyes. She bent forward and picked up a piece of string from the table. She ran it through her hands, straightening it out, and Joan saw with terror that it was a very fine strong lasso. The woman moved forward.

Joan dodged behind the table. Yet all the time she knew that this was only a feint to gain a moment of time—just a moment in which to think of some way of escape. What could she do? The door was barred—she was on the second floor—the window was useless. One quick glance told her it was shut, that before she could open it and call out on the chance of attracting the notice of a neighbour, she would be captured.

The old man in the chair was chanting in a soft high voice that ran up and down two or three notes with monotonous regularity. Joan heard the words, heard them in spite of her fear and horror. Over and over again they came. . . . She's too fat . . . she's too fat."

Then the woman took a step towards the end of the table. "This has gone on long enough," she said, and the evil in her voice and face made Joan feel sick. "Will you come, or shall I take you?"

Desperately Joan turned her head to right and left. Then she saw a small door in the wall. It had been papered in uniformity with the room, and it had previously escaped her notice. Whatever might lie behind it, it could not be worse than what was before her eyes. Time—time to think, to act, was what she must have. She calculated the distance mentally, every sense alert to watch the woman's movements. Then she sprang and caught the handle. If the door were locked. . . .

It yielded to her frantic pulling and she slammed it behind her, panting, sobbing, as she thrust a bolt home,

scarcely aware of what she did. She heard a low chuckle from the room she had left, and then silence.

Joan straightened herself. She was in the other little room on the back of the house. The blind was down and it was almost dark. The window was outlined against the wall. Joan felt her way to it and released the blind, which went up with a snap. Dusk had fallen outside, but there was still enough light to distinguish furniture.

The room was furnished meanly with a truckle bed in one corner, a chair and a table, and a combined dressing-table and washstand. In one corner hung a long curtain, which bulged out in a curiously solid manner. Originally intended to supply the needs of a wardrobe, it seemed now to be concealing something more than clothes.

Joan felt for the electric light, but found no switch. On the washstand she discovered, by feeling, a stump of candle. There were matches in her handbag, to which, by sheer force of habit, she had clung. She struck one and waited. Still no sound from the other side of the door. It was almost as if she had played into their hands by coming in. She knew that the bolt would not be much protection. It was a flimsy affair, and only fit to hold the door against casual entry. She must find some way of escape quickly.

All at once she became aware that there must be another person in the room. Her sixth sense alarmed her; then she listened, trying to hold her breath, which had been coming in long noisy gasps. Undoubtedly there was someone else to discover. Joan took up the candle and went straight over to the long curtain, the only possible place of concealment, since the bed was too low to admit of anyone crawling beneath it. She pulled back the curtain and just restrained a cry as the candle flickered in her shaking hand.

Behind the curtain, gagged and bound and kept in an upright position by an iron ring round her neck that was attached to a staple in the wall, was a girl. She was stark naked, and so thin that even in the faint light of the candle Joan could see the bones sticking through the skin.

She unfastened the gag in a minute. The girl gasped, drawing long, panting breaths. She was so weak that she could hardly speak, and then only in a whisper. Joan put her ear to the girl's mouth to catch the words.

"Get me away." That was the first cry. Joan's mouth worked. With all the will in the world if it were possible. But how?

"Who are you?" she asked, speaking very softly. "How did you get here? What are they doing to you?"

"My name's Elizabeth Drew. I answered an advertisement for a companion. I've been here weeks, I think. I don't know. They're starving me. . . . He says I'm too fat. . . ."

"He said that when I was there," said Joan in horror.

"They want you too. They keep me tied up here and chained to the wall. She feeds me a little every now and then. They'll do the same to you. There was another girl here . . . in the other corner . . . she died. They like two. When I die they'll get another one for you. . . ."

Joan felt the hair on her neck creeping upright with horror. What was this ghastly fiat? Was it all some terrible nightmare?

"But why?" she whispered.

"They're mad, I think. He comes in every day in his chair and feels me with his filthy fat hands. I think I shall go mad too, if I don't die first. He touches me all over, and then says I'm too fat."

"What about the window?" whispered Joan. "Could I get out?"

"It's barred. I tried once, when I first came. Then she never let me go again. There's no hope. She'll come in presently, and he'll come and gloat over me. And they'll tie you up too, in the other corner, and laugh when you ask for food. They say . . . they say slimming is so fashionable now."

"If I got out, I could bring help," she suggested. "You can't go by yourself. . . ."

"You'll never get out. He always stands in the way with his chair. You can't get past him anyhow.

Joan felt an unconscionable desire to be sick. Yet she was determined not to be kept here in this loathsome place. She had just as much time at her disposal as they chose to give her. With one blow, one real effort, they could force the shaky bolt on the door, and then her hope would be gone for ever. She realized that once she was in their hands again she was doomed. Mechanically she walked over to the window. As Elizabeth had said, it was barred. It overlooked her own room. . . . She remembered that now. For the moment it had escaped her. Her own room. . . . Would she ever see it again, peaceful and happy? One thing she did determine . . . if she ever got back she would ask to exchange to the other side of the house. She would never spend any more evenings looking over at the backs of the houses in Elvaston Road.

In her hand was the stump of candle. She looked at it thoughtfully. It would not last very long. She could not set fire to the flat. Elizabeth would perish, and there was no certainty of her own escape. Besides, small fires could be put out.

She opened the window at the bottom. As Elizabeth had said, it was barred, but not so closely that she could not put a hand through. One faint possible hope came to her. She thrust out her hand holding the candle and began to signal rapidly in Morse. By the grace of heaven there was no wind that night. The candle flickered, but it was of substantial wax and Joan held it carefully. It did not go out. S.O.S. she signalled three times, and then waited. Was there any hope? Suddenly a tiny flicker, like the beam of an electric torch, shone from her own lodging house. Breathlessly she watched it, trying to read the message. "Where are you?" it read.

Joan nearly cried out with joy. She had located the room and knew it was the one occupied by Freddie Tearle, a friend of her own, who would know that she was not signalling just for amusement.

"Thirty-two," she signalled. "Joan. Danger. Come." That was all, for the candle expired and she heard at the same moment the sound of an attack on the door.

Time was everything. If she could hold them off till Freddie got round she would be safe. Seizing the table, she put it in front of the door, barricading it still further with the washstand. If she could not get out, at least she might make it difficult for others to get in.

From the other side of the door came a low laugh—a laugh so evil that Joan could hardly contain her terror. It was a laugh of knowledge—a laugh that showed its owner knew every move in this game, from the first terrified entry to the final subjugation. The woman guessed that she had found Elizabeth; Joan concluded that she had deliberately left them alone together so that the process of mental torture might be well begun.

Would Freddie never come? And when he did come would he bring help with him? How did one get into flats? Suppose they did not answer the door . . . suppose he could not break it down. Time meant so much. Joan threw one look at Elizabeth and saw that she had fainted—probably the best thing for her. But on her shoulders rested the responsibility for saving them both. Well, she had done her best. She must wait.

The woman in the other room was getting impatient. Joan could hear an exclamation of temper when the bolt refused to give at the next onslaught. She could hear the old man whining, "She's too fat . . . too fat," at intervals, and then chuckling with senile filthy amusement.

Being at the back of the house she had no idea of whether help was coming or not. She could only wait, a prey to agonizing fears.

Then the bolt gave. Joan crouched in a corner of the room, all courage gone. She was too late. The flimsy barrier could not protect her for more than a moment or two, and then . . . She felt faint and knew that her only chance was to keep the most supreme control over herself.

On the threshold stood the woman. She laughed when she saw the pile of furniture. She looked at Elizabeth hanging senseless in her bonds, and laughed again. "So you found her," she said contemptuously. "Well, it will be your turn next. Slimming is so fashionable now. Our method of reducing is a little drastic, perhaps, but so efficacious. A most careful diet, adjusted to the finest proportions for giving life yet preventing a superfluity of flesh. In a few days you will hardly know yourself. Your clothes will hang on you so loosely that it will be simpler to remove them entirely. Besides, you won't need them here. We keep our patients under a very strict régime--no outings and no visitors, except the doctor, of course. And he comes twice daily."

While she spoke she was busily moving aside the table and washstand. Behind her, his chair blocking the doorway, was the old man. His fat white fingers were clawing the air.

The woman came into the room. She looked carelessly at Joan as if she were a rabbit in a snare--so securely captured that there were no risks to watch. She walked over to the window and closed it tightly.

"You will feel the cold at first without your clothes," she said, with a touch of reproof and a glance at Elizabeth.

She moved towards Joan, who shrank back against the wall. She expected the woman to seize her, and she was prepared with muscles tensed to put up as good a fight as she could. To her surprise nothing happened. The woman stood still. Joan gasped. In a second she realized the diabolicalness of the waiting. The lasso sped through the air and descended over her shoulders. Convulsively she attempted to move her arms, to attack, but to no purpose. She was safely caught, elbows drawn to her sides.

And then the bell rang. . . . It pealed through the flat in a note that would not be denied. The woman shrugged her shoulders and laughed.

"Let them ring," she said, and Joan's heart sank.

Again it pealed. And then came the most reassuring

sound that Joan had heard for many hours. A stentorian voice pealed out on the landing so that it was heard in the back room, "Open, in the name of the law."

The old man squealed like a trapped animal. The woman dropped the lasso. With one movement she was across the room and had pulled the curtain in front of Elizabeth. Again came the command from the outside landing. Springing on Joan the woman gagged her swiftly with a handkerchief, as though well accustomed to the procedure. Then she left the room, closing the door behind her.

Joan struggled with the lasso. It bit cruelly, tightly into her arms, and the more she struggled the tighter it seemed to grow. Yet if she could not get free she might never be able to tell the police where she was. She was doubtful as to their powers. Could they insist on seeing through the flat if there seemed nothing wrong?

At last. . . . She wrestled once more and suddenly felt the cord give. One arm was free. In a second the gag was out of her mouth and she was at the door, tearing it open and flinging herself into the outer room, upon a puzzled policeman and Freddie Tearle.

"Freddie, Freddie," she cried. "Save me . . . save me! There's another girl in there."

The old man squawked like a duck. The woman went over to him. Something passed between them, but Joan lost consciousness at that moment. She did not see the sudden pallor of death that came over both faces, the little bottle of cyanide that rolled to the floor, or the unconscious, barely breathing body of Elizabeth that was carried out of the inner room wrapped in the curtain.

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Afterwards Freddie told her of the horror that had overtaken a brilliant scientist stricken with a loathsome disease, and the woman who had been his assistant.

"They were better dead," he ended, and Joan agreed.

Never again would she sit at any window after dark and neglect to draw the blinds. Never again could she look at the blinds drawn opposite and refrain from a shuddering wonder as to what was going on behind them.

THE THING IN THE CELLAR

DAVID H. KELLER

THE THING IN THE CELLAR

It was a large cellar, entirely out of proportion to the house above it. The owner admitted that it was probably built for a distinctly different kind of structure from the one which rose above it. Probably the first house had been burned, and poverty had caused a diminution of the dwelling erected to take its place.

A winding stone stairway connected the cellar with the kitchen. Round the base of this series of steps successive owners of the house had placed their firewood, winter vegetables, and junk. The junk had gradually been pushed back till it rose, head high, in a barricade of uselessness. What was back of that barricade no one knew and no one cared. For some hundreds of years no one had crossed it to penetrate to the black reaches of the cellar behind it.

At the top of the steps, separating the kitchen from the cellar, was a stout oaken door. This door was, in a way, as peculiar and out of relation to the rest of the house as the cellar. It was a strange kind of door to find in a modern house, and certainly a most unusual door to find in the inside of the house—thick, stoutly built, dexterously rabbeted together, with huge wrought-iron hinges, and a lock that looked as though it came from Castle Despair. Separating a house from the outside world, such a door would be excusable ; swinging between kitchen and cellar it seemed peculiarly inappropriate.

From the earliest months of his life Tommy Tucker seemed unhappy in the kitchen. In the front parlour, in the formal dining-room, and especially on the second floor of the house he acted like a normal, healthy child ; but carry him to the kitchen, he began at once to cry. His parents, being plain people, ate in the kitchen save when they had company. Being poor, Mrs. Tucker did most of

her work, though occasionally she had a charwoman in to do the extra Saturday cleaning, and thus much of her time was spent in the kitchen. And Tommy stayed with her, at least as long as he was unable to walk. Much of the time he was decidedly unhappy.

When Tommy learned to crawl, he lost no time in leaving the kitchen. No sooner was his mother's back turned than the little fellow crawled as fast as he could for the doorway opening into the front of the house, the dining-room, and the front parlour. Once away from the kitchen he seemed happy; at least, he ceased to cry. On being returned to the kitchen his howls so thoroughly convinced the neighbours that he had colic that more than one bowl of catnip and sage tea was brought to his assistance.

It was not until the boy learned to talk that the Tuckers had any idea as to what made the boy cry so hard when he was in the kitchen. In other words, the baby had to suffer for many months till he obtained at least a little relief, and even when he told his parents what was the matter they were absolutely unable to comprehend. This is not to be wondered at, because they were both hard-working, rather simple-minded persons.

What they finally learned from their little son was this: that if the cellar door was shut and securely fastened with the heavy iron lock, Tommy could at least eat a meal in peace; if the door was simply closed and not locked, he shivered with fear, but kept quiet; but if the door was open, if even the slightest streak of black showed that it was not tightly shut, then the little three-year-old would scream himself to the point of exhaustion, especially if his tired father would refuse him permission to leave the kitchen.

Playing in the kitchen, the child developed two interesting habits. Rags, scraps of paper and splinters of wood were continually being pushed under the thick oak door to fill the space between the door and the sill. Whenever Mrs. Tucker opened the door there was always

some trash there, placed by her son. It annoyed her, and more than once the little fellow was thrashed for this conduct, but punishment acted in no way as a deterrent. The other habit was as singular. Once the door was closed and locked, he would rather boldly walk over to it and caress the old lock. Even when he was so small that he had to stand on tiptoe to touch it with the tips of his fingers he would touch it with slow caressing strokes; later on, as he grew, he used to kiss it.

His father, who only saw the boy at the end of the day, decided that there was no sense in such conduct, and in his masculine way tried to break the lad of his foolishness. There was, of necessity, no effort on the part of the hard-working man to understand the psychology back of his son's conduct. All that the man knew was that his little son was acting in a way that was decidedly queer.

Tommy loved his mother, and was willing to do anything he could to help her in the household tasks, but one thing he would not do, and never did do, and that was to fetch and carry between the house and the cellar. If his mother opened the door he would run screaming from the room, and he never returned voluntarily till he was assured that the door was closed.

He never explained just why he acted as he did. In fact, he refused to talk about it, at least to his parents, and that was just as well, because had he done so they would simply have been more positive than ever that there was something wrong with their only child. They tried, in their own way, to break the child of his unusual habits; failing to change him at all, they decided to ignore his peculiarities.

That is, they ignored them till he became six years old and the time came for him to go to school. He was a sturdy little chap by that time, and more intelligent than the usual boys beginning in the primer class. Mr. Tucker was, at times, proud of him; the child's attitude toward the cellar door was the one thing most disturbing to the father's pride. Finally nothing would do but that the Tucker family call on the neighbourhood physician.

It was an important event in the life of the Tuckers, so important that it demanded the wearing of Sunday clothes and all that sort of thing.

"The matter is just this, Doctor Hawthorn," said Mr. Tucker in a somewhat embarrassed manner. "Our little Tommy is old enough to start to school, but he behaves childish in regard to our cellar, and the missus and I thought you could tell us what to do about it. It must be his nerves."

"Ever since he was a baby," continued Mrs. Tucker, taking up the thread of conversation where her husband had paused, "Tommy has had a great fear of the cellar. Even now, big boy that he is, he does not love me enough to fetch and carry for me through that door and down those steps. It is not natural for a child to act like he does, and what with chinking the cracks with rags and kissing the lock, he drives me to the point where I fear he may become daft-like as he grows older."

The doctor, eager to satisfy new customers, and dimly remembering some lectures on the nervous system received when he was a medical student, asked some general questions, listened to the boy's heart, examined his lungs and looked at his eyes and finger-nails. At last he commented :

"Looks like a fine, healthy boy, to me."

"Yes, all except the cellar door," replied the father.

"Has he ever been sick?"

"Naught but fits once or twice when he cried himself blue in the face," answered the mother.

"Frightened?"

"Perhaps. It was always in the kitchen."

"Suppose you go out and let me talk to Tommy by myself?"

And there sat the doctor very much at his ease, and the little six-year-old boy very uneasy.

"Tommy, what is there in the cellar you are afraid of?"

"I don't know."

"Have you ever seen it?"

"No, sir."

"Ever heard it? Smelt it?"

"No, sir."

"Then how do you know there is something there?"

"Because."

"Because what?"

"Because there is."

That was as far as Tommy would go, and at last his seeming obstinacy annoyed the physician even as it had for several years annoyed Mr. Tucker. He went to the door and called the parents into the room.

"He thinks there is something down in the cellar," he stated.

The Tuckers simply looked at each other.

"That's foolish," commented Mr. Tucker.

"'Tis just a plain cellar with junk and firewood and cider barrels in it," added Mrs. Tucker. "Since we moved into that house I have not missed a day without going down those stone steps, and I know there is nothing there. But the lad has always screamed when the door was open: I recall now that since he was a child in arms he has always screamed when the door was open."

"He thinks there is something there," said the doctor.

"That is why we brought him to you," replied the father. "It's the child's nerves. Perhaps foetida, or something, will calm him."

"I will tell you what to do," advised the doctor. "He thinks there is something there. Just as soon as he finds that he is wrong and that there is nothing there, he will forget about it. He has been humoured too much. What you want to do is to open that cellar door and make him stay by himself in the kitchen. Nail the door open so he cannot close it. Leave him alone there for an hour, and then go and laugh at him and show him how silly it was for him to be afraid of an empty cellar. I will give you some nerve and blood tonic and that will help, but the big thing is to show him that there is nothing to be afraid of."

On the way back to the Tucker home Tommy broke

away from his parents. They caught him after an exciting chase, and kept him between them the rest of the way home. Once in the house he disappeared and was found in the guest-room under the bed. The afternoon being already spoiled for Mr. Tucker, he determined to keep the child under observation for the rest of the day. Tommy ate no supper, in spite of the urgings of the unhappy mother. The dishes were washed, the evening paper read, the evening pipe smoked ; and then, and only then, did Mr. Tucker take down his tool-box and get out a hammer and some long nails.

"And I am going to nail the door open, Tommy, so you cannot close it, as that was what the doctor said, Tommy, and you are to be a man and stay here in the kitchen alone for an hour, and we will leave the lamp a-burning, and then when you find there is naught to be afraid of, you will be well and a real man and not something for a man to be ashamed of being the father of."

But at the last Mrs. Tucker kissed Tommy and cried and whispered to her husband not to do it, and to wait till the boy was larger ; but nothing was to do except to nail the thick door open so it could not be shut, and leave the boy there alone with the lamp burning and the dark open space of the doorway to look at with eyes that grew as hot and burning as the flame of the lamp.

That same day Dr. Hawthorn took supper with a classmate of his, a man who specialized in psychiatry, and who was particularly interested in children. Hawthorn told Johnson about his newest case, the little Tucker boy, and asked him for his opinion. Johnson frowned.

"Children are odd, Hawthorn. Perhaps they are like dogs. It may be their nervous system is more acute than in the adult. We know that our eyesight is limited, also our hearing and smell. I firmly believe that there are forms of life which exist in such a form that we can neither see, hear, nor smell them. Fondly we delude ourselves into the fallacy of believing that they do not exist because we cannot prove their existence. This Tucker lad may have a nervous system that is peculiarly acute. He may

dimly appreciate the existence of something in the cellar which is unappreciable to his parents. Evidently there is some basis to this fear of his. Now I am not saying that there is anything in the cellar. In fact, I suppose that it is just an ordinary cellar, but this boy, since he was a baby, has thought that there was something there, and that is just as bad as though there actually were. What I would like to know is, what makes him think so. Give me the address, and I will call to-morrow and have a talk with the little fellow."

"What do you think of my advice?"

"Sorry, old man, but I think it was perfectly rotten. If I were you I would stop round there on my way home and prevent them from following it. The little fellow may be badly frightened. You see, he evidently thinks there is something there."

"But there isn't."

"Perhaps not. No doubt he is wrong, but he thinks so."

It all worried Dr. Hawthorn so much that he decided to take his friend's advice. It was a cold night, a foggy night, and the physician felt cold as he tramped along the London streets. At last he came to the Tucker house. He remembered now that he had been there once before, long ago, when little Tommy Tucker came into the world. There was a light in the front window, and in no time at all Mr. Tucker came to the door.

"I have come to see Tommy," said the doctor.

"He is back in the kitchen," replied the father.

"He gave one cry, but since then he has been quiet," sobbed the wife.

"If I had let her have her way she would have opened the door, but I said to her, 'Mother, now is the time to make a man out of our Tommy.' And I guess he knows by now that there was naught to be afraid of. Well, the hour is up. Suppose we go and get him and put him to bed?"

"It has been a hard time for the little child," whispered the wife.

Carrying the candle, the man walked ahead of the woman and the doctor, and at last opened the kitchen door. The room was dark.

"Lamp has gone out," said the man. "Wait till I light it."

"Tommy! Tommy!" called Mrs. Tucker.

But the doctor ran to where a white form was stretched on the floor. Sharply he called for more light. Trembling, he examined all that was left of little Tommy. Twitching, he looked down the open space into the cellar. At last he turned to Tucker and Tucker's wife.

"Tommy—Tommy has been hurt. I guess he is dead!" he stammered.

The mother threw herself on the floor and picked up the torn, mutilated thing that had been, only a little while ago, her little Tommy.

The man took his hammer and drew out the nails and closed the door and locked it, and then drove in a long spike to reinforce the lock. Then he took hold of the doctor's shoulders and shook him.

"What killed him, Doctor? What killed him?" he shouted into Hawthorn's ear.

The doctor looked at him bravely in spite of the fear in his throat.

"How do I know, Tucker?" he replied. "How do I know? Didn't you tell me that there was nothing there? Nothing down there? In the cellar?"

DORNER CORDALANTHUS

H. H. GORST

DORNER CORDALANTHUS

FROM the time of his leaving college when I first met Dorner, his whole life was given up to research work.

He was an ardent Palaeobotanist, and his passion for delving into the history of bygone plants was as keen as that of an archaeologist among mummies. Like them, he was prepared to go through any dangers for the sake of new discoveries, and I received letters from all parts of the world where he was digging among rocks in the hope of finding fossils of unknown prehistoric plants.

His house in Surrey, where he lived with his old servant, contained the cabinets where he kept the magnificent collection of curiosities and relics of ever-growing interest. Apart from these botanical treasures the rooms were a museum for rare shells, weird insects, precious stones, idols, and whatnots. I would spend happy weekends browsing among these curios, and I'm afraid I envied him the job, which seemed infinitely better than my stockbroking one.

However, at forty Dorner still had not attained his ambition. On the evenings when I could get down from town we would potter round his charming garden and discuss his pet scientific points.

"I am positive," he would say, "that some day they will discover a fossilized seed in which fertile embryo will be found. Then we will really be able to know what a prehistoric plant was like."

We argued this point so often, I used to tease him.

"How can you expect a seed that has been embedded for millions of years to sprout? You might as well hope to find a sleeping Dinosaur. Besides, seeds germinate upon the ground, not on the plant, and in that time of great heat they germinated at once."

He would put forward the instance of the toad that

had been imprisoned in a stone for centuries, and was still alive.

"A reptile," said I. "We are talking of vegetables."

Dorner had a theory that the missing link between human beings and the rest of the living world would eventually be established through plants. He argued that the functions of plants are identical with men.

"They have never gone on their bellies like animals. I believe there is a direct connection between them and us."

"Well, how did we manage about our roots?" I would put in.

"It is hardly necessary for some plants to have roots. They exist chiefly by air taken in by their leaves."

Sitting in his garden one evening on the day before his departure on a long tour of research, he broke silence by saying, "You know, I think the legend of the mandrake must have some truth in it."

"The mandrake was supposed to squeak, wasn't it?" I asked.

"It screamed when it was uprooted, and the roots had a human shape. Don't you see a connection with Dante's story of the tree-people in hell and the Maya symbol of a branching body?"

"I can't quite see what you are driving at," I broke in. "Those were allegories."

"There is truth at the bottom of all allegories and legends. That fact has been proved time and again. Why, there are meat-eating plants now, plants that move, that have digestive powers like we have."

"Well?" I asked.

"Millions of years ago, in some great geological upheaval, there may have been destroyed a plant which had become free of the soil. Which lived by oxygen as we do."

"A kind of emancipated cabbage," I suggested.

It was impossible not to poke fun at Dorner. He was like a child when he got on his pet theory, but he took my chaff in good part.

Next day I saw him off on his expedition to India,

where he was to lead a research party to the lesser known portions of Gondwana land. This region they knew to be rich in specimens of permo-carboniferous flora. Dorner looked like a plant himself as he stood on the deck waving good-bye. His thin little body was rigid, whilst his arms brandished a walking stick and two green-topped butterfly nets. After a few months I began to have letters from him. They had found some excellent specimens of *Glossopteris* flora, relics of some hitherto unknown plants. They had had exciting adventures with snakes, etc.

After that I heard no more until one morning I received a telegram from a remote station in India. It was like Dorner to wire. In his excitement he couldn't wait for the post to impart his news. What he had to say thrilled me, though I was not so keen on Palæobotany as my friend.

Returning at once. Discovered apparently fertile seed. Sail Synai June 26th. Dorner.

I realized the importance of this discovery. None of these embedded seeds had so far shown any powers of germination. If this seed should quicken it would mean the re-creation of a plant which had its being in those past ages that we can only guess at.

I met Dorner on his arrival in England, and we went back to his house. He seemed smaller and thinner than ever, but wild with excitement and enthusiasm. We sat up late in his little sitting-room, while he described his adventures and exhibited his trophies. The wonderful seed was displayed with the reverent pride of a mother displaying her first-born. It had been discovered among several other fossilized seeds in the Talchin boulder beds. Why it had not germinated was a mystery, but it was still fertile, and Dorner had decided to plant it under the conditions he thought would be most natural to it. In appearance it had the fleshy consistency of a nasturtium seed, with the same crinkled skin. But whereas that is generally green or brown, this was a sickly yellow. But

one should be lenient with a complexion when it is a few million years old. What I could not forgive was the seed's strong resemblance to a dried maggot. I pointed this out to Dorner, hiding my repugnance as best I could.

"You don't think you have got hold of a fossilized grub by mistake?" I asked facetiously.

He was hovering tenderly over the curled, black-headed little body lying in its bed of cotton-wool, and answered with great lack of humour, "Don't be an ass. This may prove my theory. I wonder what sort of temperature a specimen of this sort would require."

For the next few weeks I believe his spirit lived in the Palaeozoic Age while he tried to emulate its climate with what scientific aids he possessed. During this time he was very mysterious about the seed, and allowed no one near the greenhouse where it had been planted. However, I turned up one evening at his house, and he took me down the garden with Tim, the fox-terrier, dancing at our heels. The little dog was no more excited than his master. Dorner was positively trembling. The only words he said were, "It's sprouted! Come and see."

The conservatory was stacked with electric heaters, artificial light, and, in fact, every appliance he could think of to give the plant a better chance. He would not allow Timmy in. He might get entangled among the wires and things. I shut the little dog out; we both adored Timmy, and leaving him to bark dolefully, advanced into the holy of holies.

I found Dorner had arranged a kind of barricade round the seed bed. Evidently winds were not allowed to blow upon it or sun beat too fiercely. It might have been an Emperor's couch which we approached; but though I smiled to myself I could not help feeling awe-stricken. Here was the descendant of plants which had flourished when our world of man was not thought of. When enormous and grotesque reptiles walked the oozy earth and fought with each other for mastery. And now nothing remained of them but a few hoarded bones. Dorner switched off an electric battery which was doing

its best to persuade the embryo it was back in the Dark Ages, and presented to me a large pot full of earth.

"I noticed it this morning," he said in a whisper.

Bending cautiously over the earth, I saw a small white object protruding above the surface.

"Is that the seed?" I asked.

He nodded. "I have been to endless trouble getting the right chemicals for the soil. I wrote to Edgar for particulars. He is an expert on what soil was made of at that time. Judging by the result, I must have got the right ingredients."

I looked more closely at the tiny plant, and, as I gazed, it seemed to writhe upwards like a worm does as it presses its way through the ground. I felt suddenly sick.

"It's moving," I said.

"Yes!" gasped my friend. "That's the most marvelous thing about it. It shows my theory was true. It moves of its own accord."

We went out of the stifling greenhouse to meet the joyous, bounding Timmy. After that there was no doubt about the seed having germinated. To give it more freedom—there were no pots in the Palaeozoic Age—Dorner moved it into a specially prepared bed in the greenhouse. When it was large enough to receive visitors, scientists called upon it. Reporters waited for interviews. It was photographed. Botanical papers wrote long articles about it. It was christened Dorner Cordaianthus, as Palaeobotanists earnestly agreed it belonged to that family. Dorner himself considered it more of a Cycadean type, but subsequent events proved him wrong. I was much too ill-versed in the technical knowledge of these things to argue the point, but I was very proud of being one of the first to see it in its infancy.

It certainly grew at a tremendous pace. This may have been due to the artificial aids used. A fortnight after my first visit I inspected the plant again, and was astonished at its rapid development. The Cordaianthus now had the appearance of a tree, and was nearly two feet high.

Branch-like shoots protruded from the upper part of its stem or trunk, which measured about two inches in circumference. White in colour, it was lined all over by a network of brownish veins that evidently formed some part of a system of circulation. The whole growth was covered with fine hairs, as one sees on a poppy stalk. These hairs became sharp hard points or thorns, when approaching the ends of the shoots. The shoots did not develop from the ends like ordinary plants. There were no budding leaves or flowers. They were in the nature of suckers, each having a worm-like head surrounded by the thorns, whilst the branch body grew from the parent stem, becoming broader and longer but never losing its original shape. These sucker-like heads expanded or contracted as the plant swayed. For it swayed like seaweed in a swell. But there was no current to sway it. As if in some unfelt wind it writhed upwards and down with a horrible rhythm of its own. The word growth adequately expressed the impression the plant gave me. It had the decayed appearance of a fungus, rather than the freshness of a shrub. Also, there was none of that roughness of texture one sees on the bark of shrubs. The main stem from which the branches grew was smooth as they were. The joint was invisible, like the arms of a body. That was what it reminded me of. But not a human one. More like an attenuated octopus, with its sucker-like tendrils stretching out and lengthening as the thing grew. And it always kept up that slow, horrible swaying movement. This thing was alive, like an octopus.

I turned to Dorner, who was watching it with adoring eyes.

"Have you ever tried to kill it?" I asked.

"Kill it!" he exclaimed in horror.

"Yes. Have you ever tried to find out whether it will die like an animal, I mean? Some plants are harder to kill than animals."

"For instance?"

"Well, the ordinary convolvulus is pretty hard to eradicate from a garden. At least I find it so. Chop it

off at one end, and it will come up in bunches somewhere else. It has worm-like roots rather like this."

"Fancy comparing a common thing like that with the Cordaianthus," exclaimed Dorner.

"It grows nearly as quickly as this," I answered. "I could swear it's done some growing while we have been standing here."

He swelled with pride. "Isn't it marvellous? And we are practically the first who have ever seen it."

It certainly was wonderful, but I thought as I watched those undulating suckers moving in this blind rhythmic way, that, before the climate in that long past time got too hot or too cold for it, the Cordaianthus could not have been nearly so decorative as our simple little convolvulus.

Dorner stepped forward and touched one of the tendrils. Instantly, as though an electric message had passed through the whole body, all the suckers turned to the one his hand rested on.

"Take care!" I cried.

A thorn had pricked him. There was a drop of blood on the whitish surface of the plant. Dorner took out his handkerchief to wipe the stain away, but I stopped him, saying, "Leave it there. It will be gone to-morrow."

"But why should it go, and it looks beastly?"

I pointed to the swaying heads which were bunching together round the red splodge. "They will suck it up. It's blood they want."

Dorner stared at me. "You mean it's insectivorous, but it's quite a different sort of plant."

"I think it's carnivorous," I answered. "You'll have to give it something to eat. Those worm things want something more than carbon dioxide."

Just outside the greenhouse door, on our way in to tea, was a small white object pressing its way through the turf.

I showed it to Dorner. "You needn't have worried about all those electric contrivances. Our Cordaianthus seems to be making itself very much at home."

My friend was on his knees examining the tiny shoot.

"It must have sunk its roots right under the greenhouse," he said in an awed voice.

I laughed. "The climate of England seems to agree with it. You'll be having it popping through the drawing-room carpet next. I believe it gnaws its way up."

"Rot!" said Dorner. "It's funny it hasn't any leaves, though perhaps there will be some kind of bloom. Well, let's hope it will be a nice-looking one whenever it thinks fit to come out."

We went in to tea.

I was right about the plant's growth. In a week or so Dorner's lawn was punctuated with tiny writhing tendrils. Evidently it grew faster underground than in the air. Dorner was obliged to destroy some of them. He even dug down and cut the roots away, but this was as useless as destroying a shoot of a convolvulus. He said it was like chopping worms in half, and made him sick. Then the neighbours, who at first were anxious to have cuttings from the new plant, began to complain. The Cordaianthus was sprouting all over their gardens.

"And I don't like the look of it," said the vicar's wife. "I've never seen a tree that moves without anything to move it. Please take it away, Mr. Dorner. It's coming up all among my vegetables."

There began a regular campaign against the Cordaianthus, in Dorner's garden as well as others. His lawn presented a mass of sprouting worms, to which weed-killer and the spade were vigorously applied. He was content to keep one specimen, which grew outside the greenhouse. The one inside had died of a mysterious disease. We were at a loss to know what had killed it. Dorner thought the heat had been too great, but I harboured the view it had starved to death. We watched the emaciated body quiver in a last agony like an animal.

"It wants meat," I said, nauseated with the sight.

Dorner would not believe it was carnivorous. "How could it get meat in the Palaeozoic Age?" he argued. "I'm giving it a special sort of water with chemicals in it, which Edgar sent me."

Suffice it to say, the thing died.

One evening we were sitting in the garden discussing the surviving plant. There had been a stream of complaints that morning from houses round about. People could not eradicate the shoots from their land.

"The cartloads of weed-killer they must have bought would sink a ship," said Dorner, sighing. "I believe they are afraid of the thing."

"Afraid or not," I answered, "it's not jolly to have it hanging about in flower-beds."

My friend stroked Timmy's soft coat tenderly. "I think there will be a flower soon, now it's got into the right environment. The greenhouse was obviously too hot. As we know, it must have existed in the Permo-Carboniferous strata when things were getting a bit cooler owing to glaciers. The reason for the seed having been fertile but never germinating was a sudden catastrophe of some kind—flood, earthquake or landslide, which submerged it."

"It certainly possesses the vitality which would account for its tenacity to life," I remarked.

Dorner seemed to have dropped his theory of plant and human connection. Once or twice I caught him looking at the tree with aversion in his eyes. It stood now about four feet high, and in the full light of the afternoon sun presented a particularly white and uncanny appearance. The crowd of suckers which formed its branches curled and uncurled gently in the summer air. A vigorous extermination of all subsidiary shoots had left it for the moment the sole survivor on our lawn.

"I suppose it will die in the winter," said Dorner presently.

"I hope so," answered I. The remark did not cause the flare of temper I expected.

"I don't believe I should care," he said, with the naïveté of a child. "Not since this morning."

"What happened this morning?"

"I went up close to have a look at it and one of the

suckers twisted round my arm. It took quite a time to get it off. It showed extraordinary strength."

I stooped to pat Timmy, who lay at our feet. "Why don't you cut it down?"

Dorner looked apologetic. "It's such an extraordinary thing; seems a pity to destroy it, but if it dies a natural death I don't mind. I suppose it would have to be killed some time simply because it shows a propensity to live. I expect, in the Dark Ages, or whenever the thing existed, there was plenty of room to spread. No back gardens there." Dorner smiled. "How keen Rayland would have been to see it. He reconstructed the Cordaianthus, you know. Although I have never agreed this had the slightest resemblance to that family."

As Dorner spoke a bird fluttered on to one of the slowly moving branches. With the swiftness of a snake the bough it rested on lapped round the struggling body and crushed it to death. I sprang to my feet. If a hatchet had been in my hand instead of a stick, the tree would have been hacked to pieces. I struck it furiously again and again.

Dorner came to the rescue. "It's no use doing that; the bird's dead. There will be another cause for complaint among the neighbours if it starts eating the livestock. Evidently that's what it has been needing."

I saw the scientist was transcendent in him, or I would have pleaded for the venomous thing to be destroyed. Dorner, however, was obsessed by the idea of seeing a possible flower, and would not give up that hope without a struggle.

Business kept me in town a good deal and I did not see much of him. He wrote that he was in trouble again with the neighbours. They threatened to take action against him for still keeping the plant. Then I had a heart broken letter saying that poor little Timmy was dead. He had been found curled up in the tree with the suckers massed about his body like a swarm of bees.

"I killed the Cordaianthus," wrote Dorner. "Dug it up and burnt it. People can't grumble any more, but it

wasn't for their silly sakes I killed the thing. I was so mad with rage about Timmy. It might have spared him. I used to give it hunks of meat too."

Poor Dorner! But one might as well bring an Ichthyosaurus into our civilized world and keep it as a pet. I hoped he would plan another expedition soon and forget his disappointment.

I was away in Paris for a month, and on my return rang him up. As a rule he came to the 'phone himself, and I was surprised when his old servant answered:

"The professor is not here, sir. We have been trying to find you to ask if you know where he has gone."

"When did he go?" I asked.

"He's been away three days, sir. I didn't know what to do. He's not left any address."

Evidently the responsibility of his vanished master was proving too great, and the man was anxious I should come down.

I did not feel anxious as I knew Dorner was upset about his plant and had probably gone off for a change, not wishing to be bothered with letters. However, things began to look serious when I found that no luggage had been taken, and my friend had not said anything about going away. I rang up the police. Why his man had not done so before was a mystery to me, but I suppose he did not wish to do so for fear of annoying Dorner. He had just gone on from day to day hoping his master would turn up.

The [police arrived and questioned old Standish as to when he had last seen his master. It was after tea three days ago. He had seen Dorner go down the garden smoking a pipe.

"Did the gentleman say anything to you before he went out?"

"Yes, sir. He said he was going out to get some weed-killer."

"What did he want weed-killer for?"

"I don't know what he wanted it for specially, sir. He used it a good deal lately."

"What on?"

"For that queer plant of his, sir. It kept coming up in odd places."

"Oh, I see. And where did he keep the weed-killer?"

"In the greenhouse at the bottom of the garden."

"And are you sure Mr. Dorner didn't come back to the house again?"

"I couldn't be sure of that, sir, because I went back to the scullery after I saw him leave the house."

"Could you see the garden from the scullery?"

"No, sir; it's at the back."

"And when did you begin to be disturbed at your master's absence?"

"I had supper ready for him, sir, and rang the bell, but he never came in."

"Was he generally punctual for meals?"

"Not as a rule, sir. I've known him stay out till twelve or one o'clock, sir, in the summer. That's why I didn't worry as much as I might have done."

"But in the morning, when he was not in bed, what did you think then?"

"I didn't know what I ought to do, sir. I didn't like to ring up Scotland Yard in case he'd come in, sir, and find the place all full of policemen."

The sergeant bore this well. "But you should have got into communication with us before this, you know. I suppose you searched the house?"

The old man had looked everywhere. The greenhouse and surrounding shrubberies were examined, and the local ponds were dragged. The excitement became intense. People forgot their quarrel about the Cordaianthus and became full of solicitude.

"Such a charming man! I do hope nothing has happened. He was so eccentric, wasn't he?"

For myself, I wished I had not left Dorner at the time when he needed a friend. I was afraid his disappointment about his plant must have affected his brain. All

the same, there seemed no particular reason why he should have been so upset. I noticed several little white shoots coming up on the lawn, which showed the Cordaianthus was still throwing out hostages to fortune. But from where? Leaving the inspector and his men to ferret among the bushes in their search for footprints, etc., I retraced my steps to the house. A member of the Force was at the front door talking with Standish.

"And the cellars?" I heard him say. "Did you go through them?"

There was only the wine-cellar and the coal-hole, but I remembered another room which Dorner always kept locked, and which the old man with his limited intelligence would not have thought of looking in. This cellar-room was very dark, and was used for storing certain specimens Dorner brought home which required a damp atmosphere. I did not remember it having been opened lately, and suddenly understood what had been in my friend's mind when he got the weed-killer. I beckoned to the sergeant, and he followed me down the cellar steps.

"I don't think Standish will have searched this part of the house," I explained. "Mr. Dorner generally kept this room locked. Hallo! It's half-open."

We had come to the door and I tried to push through. It resisted me strangely, as if some soft pliant body leant against it on the inside. Then, as I persisted, the door gave way and we saw a crowd of white, slowly moving arms stretching out towards the light. A spectral tree was growing from the damp earth floor of the cellar, its trunk long and attenuated, with branches which stretched up till they crushed against the low ceiling. In the midst of them, and close in their white embrace, was the body of Dorner. It was wrapped and locked in a mass of suckers. He must have come down here to find out where the roots came from and touched one of these starved things by mistake. It had wound about his throat, a rooted octopus. I and the sergeant hacked it to pieces, but Dorner was dead. On some of the hairy tendrils something had grown. It was a kind of scarlet fungus,

blotching over the sickly branches. The *Cordaianthus* had flowered at last—whether before or after Dorner's death no one can tell. I will not describe the condition he was in. The plant was carnivorous, and it took what it could get.

NIGHT AND SILENCE

MAURICE LEVEL

NIGHT AND SILENCE

THEY were old, crippled, horrible. The woman hobbled about on two crutches ; one of the men, blind, walked with his eyes shut, his hands outstretched, his fingers spread open ; the other, a deaf mute, followed with his head lowered, rarely raising the sad, restless eyes that were the only sign of life in his impassive face.

It was said that they were two brothers and a sister, and that they were united by a savage affection. One was never seen without the others ; at the church doors they shrank back into the shadows, keeping away from those professional beggars who stand boldly in the full light so that passers-by may be ashamed to ignore their importunacy. They did not ask for anything. Their appearance alone was a prayer for help. As they moved silently through the narrow gloomy streets, a mysterious trio, they seemed to personify Age, Night, and Silence.

One evening, in their hovel near the gates of the city, the woman died peacefully in their arms without a cry, with just one long look of distress which the deaf mute saw, and one violent shudder which the blind man felt because her hand clasped his wrist. Without a sound she passed into eternal silence.

Next day, for the first time, the two men were seen without her. They dragged about all day without even stopping at the baker's shop where they usually received doles of bread. Towards dusk, when lights began to twinkle at the dark crossroads, when the reflection of lamps gave the houses the appearance of a smile, they bought with the few halfpence they had received two poor little candles, and they returned to the desolate hovel where the old sister lay on her pallet with no one to watch or pray for her.

They kissed the dead woman. The man came to put

her in her coffin. The deal boards were fastened down and the coffin was placed on two wooden trestles ; then, once more alone, the two brothers laid a sprig of box-wood on a plate, lighted their candles, and sat down for the last all-too-short vigil.

Outside, the cold wind played round the joints of the ill-fitting door. Inside, the small trembling flames barely broke the darkness with their yellow light. . . . Not a sound. . . .

For a long time they remained like this, praying, remembering, meditating. . . .

Tired out with weeping, at last they fell asleep.

When they woke it was still night. The lights of the candles still glimmered, but they were lower. The cold that is the precursor of dawn made them shiver. But there was something else—what was it ? They leaned forward, the one trying to see, the other to hear. For some time they remained motionless ; then there being no repetition of what had roused them, they lay down again and began to pray.

Suddenly, for the second time they sat up. Had either of them been alone, he would have thought himself the plaything of some fugitive hallucination. When one sees without hearing, or hears without seeing, illusion is easily created. But something abnormal was taking place ; there could be no doubt about it since both were affected, since it appealed both to eyes and ears at the same time ; they were fully conscious of this, but were unable to understand.

Between them they had the power of complete comprehension. Singly, each had but a partial, agonizing conception.

The deaf-mute got up and walked about. Forgetting his brother's infirmity, the blind man asked in a voice choked with fear :

"What is it ? What's the matter ? Why have you got up ?"

He heard him moving, coming and going, stopping, starting off again, and again stopping ; and having

nothing but these sounds to guide his reason, his terror increased till his teeth began to chatter. He was on the point of speaking again, but remembered, and relapsed into a muttering :

"What can he see ? What is it ?"

The deaf-mute took a few more steps, rubbed his eyes, and presumably reassured, went back to his mattress and fell asleep.

The blind man heaved a sigh of relief, and silence fell once more, broken only by the prayers he mumbled in a monotonous undertone, his soul benumbed by grief as he waited till sleep should come and pour light into his darkness.

He was almost sleeping when the murmurs which had before made him tremble, wrenched him from an uneasy doze.

It sounded like a soft scratching mingled with light blows on a plank, curious rubbings, and stifled moans.

He leaped up. The deaf-mute had not moved. Feeling that the fear that culminates in panic was threatening him, he strove to reason with himself :

"Why should this noise terrify me ? . . . The night is always full of sounds. . . . My brother is moving uneasily in his sleep . . . yes, that's it. . . . Just now I heard him walking up and down, and there was the same noise. . . . It must have been the wind. . . . But I know the sound of the wind, and it has never been like that . . . it was a noise I had never heard. . . . What could it have been ? No . . . it could not be. . . ."

He bit his fists. An awful suspicion had come to him.

"Suppose . . . no, it's not possible. . . . Suppose it was . . . there it is again ! . . . Again . . . louder and louder . . . someone is scratching, scratching, knocking. . . . My God ! A voice . . . her voice ! She is calling ! She is crying ! Help, help !"

He threw himself out of bed and roared :

"François ! . . . quick ! . . . Help ! . . . Look ! . . ."

He was half-mad with fear. He tore wildly at his hair, shouting :

"Look ! . . . You've got eyes. You—you can see !
. . ."

The moans became louder, the raps firmer. Feeling his way, stumbling against the walls, knocking against the packing-cases which served as furniture, tripping in the holes in the floor, he staggered about trying to find his sleeping brother.

He fell and got up again, bruised, covered with blood, sobbing :

"I have no eyes ! I have no eyes !"

He had upset the plate on which lay the sprig of box, and the sound of the earthenware breaking on the floor gave the finishing touch to his panic.

"Help ! What have I done ? Help !"

The noises grew louder and more terrifying, and as an agonized cry sounded, his last doubts left him. Behind his empty eyes he imagined he saw the horrible thing. . . .

He saw the old sister beating against the tightly-closed lid of her coffin. He saw her superhuman terror, her agony, a thousand times worse than that of any other death. . . . She was there, alive, yes, alive, a few steps away from him . . . but where ? She heard his steps, his voice, and he, blind, could do nothing to help her.

Where was his brother ? Flinging his arms from right to left, he knocked over the candles ; the wax flowed over his fingers, hot, like blood. The noise grew louder, more despairing ; the voice was speaking, saying words that died away in smothered groans. . . .

"Courage !" he shrieked. "I'm here ! I'm coming !"

He was now crawling along on his knees, and a sudden turn flung him against a bed ; he thrust out his arms, felt a body, seized it by the shoulders and shook it with all the strength that remained in him.

Violently awakened, the deaf-mute sprang up uttering horrible cries and trying to see, but now that the candles were out he, too, was plunged into night, the impenetrable darkness that held more terror for him than for the blind man. Stupefied with sleep he groped about wildly with

his hands, which closed in a vicelike grip on his brother's throat, stifling cries of :

"Look ! Look !"

They rolled together on the floor, upsetting all that came in their way, knotted together, ferociously tearing each other with tooth and nail. In a very short time their hoarse breathing had died away. The voice, so distant and yet so near, was cut short by a spasm . . . there was a cracking noise . . . the imprisoned body was raising itself in one last supreme effort for freedom . . . a grinding noise . . . sobs . . . again the grinding noise . . . silence.

Outside, the trees shuddered as they bowed in the gale ; the rain beat against the walls. The late winter's dawn was still crouching on the edge of the horizon. Inside the walls of the hovel not a sound, not a breath.

Night and Silence.

THE INN

GUY PRESTON

THE INN

THE life of a country doctor is apt to prove rather strenuous, particularly when his practice extends over an area of twenty square miles, and his sole vehicle happens to be a worn-out bicycle of antediluvian manufacture; consequently it was with an exclamation of annoyance that Dr. Sutton awoke, at about half past four one winter's morning, to hear the front door-bell ringing furiously. His only servant had departed the previous day on a long-promised visit to her mother in Keswick, and as he was a bachelor he was, of course, alone in the house.

"Let them ring, confound them," he muttered to himself, "disturbing a hard-working body at this ungodly hour! And," he added, "after all the rumpus, I suppose it's the usual cry of 'Come at once—Willie has a pain in the toe.' Some folks seem to think a doctor has no right to a few hours' sleep."

He snuggled himself still further under the bedclothes, and tried to ignore the bell and the knocker, which had now come into play, but to no purpose.

BANG! BANG! BANG! Whoever it was out there had no intention of being denied, for the house shook under the thunder of the knocking, and at last Dr. Sutton rose, and slipping on his dressing-gown, went grumbling to the door.

As he opened it, peering into the darkness, a figure darted through into the house, slamming the door to after him, and clutched at the doctor's arm with a trembling hand.

The doctor made to free himself, but the stranger clung the tighter. "I was told a doctor lives here," he gasped, his breath coming in great gulps, that made a

hoarse tearing sound in his throat. "Doctor Sutton! Are you the doctor? I want a doctor!"

The doctor surveyed him calmly before leading the way to his study. The surgery was a sort of outhouse and as cold as an ice-well, but here, in the doctor's private study, a few embers still glowed despite the lateness of the hour, and the room was still warm.

"Yes, I am he," he replied, and threw a log on the fire.

"Then for God's sake, tell me—am I *mad*?"

Dr. Sutton looked at him before replying. He presented an extraordinary appearance. His hair was wild and thick with dust and sweat, his clothes torn, and his face, which normally would be pleasing, was now cut and bleeding and begrimed with filth. A wild look was in his eyes, but in his voice was such a note of anxious pleading that, startled as he was by the stranger's queer aspect, the doctor was reassured.

"You have had a bad scare," was his answer. He motioned the man to a chair, into which he immediately collapsed, and went to the bureau upon which reposed half a dozen bottles and a siphon.

"Drink this!"

The man swallowed the brandy gratefully, and gradually the colour crept back into his cheeks.

The doctor regarded him keenly during the few moments of silence that followed. There was no need to hurry him; he would tell his own story when he had sufficiently recovered. He now lolled back in the chair, his right hand thrust deep into his coat pocket, his left tapping nervously on the arm, and from time to time wiping imaginary stains from off his coat and the knees of his trousers.

Obviously he was in great distress, and his nerves had been taxed to their utmost.

Presently he began to speak, and this is the tale that he told.

"My name is Methuen—Frank Methuen—and I travel

in photographic accessories. My firm—Messrs. Bardsey and Black—switched me up to this district only a fortnight ago. Previously I had done only the South Coast towns, and I may say that I disliked intensely shooting up to Cumberland, away from all my friends, to break entirely fresh ground with my goods. However, somebody had to go, and as luck would have it I was the one to be chosen."

He paused, and the doctor nodded encouragingly.

"We all have to do things occasionally that go against the grain," he said. • "It was not my choice to be buried in the moors like this, with a practice stretching from Gretna half-way to Whitehaven. Speaking figuratively, of course," he added with a smile, as Methuen looked incredulous. "There are times when I long for the bustle and noise of a big town, and would willingly exchange this house, cosy as it is, for a flat and a practice among the slums of Glasgow."

"Then you can imagine how I felt, a Londoner, used to travelling as I am, when I found myself deposited by the L.N.E.R. at a dirty little station near Cockermouth—Hayra I think it was called."

The doctor nodded again and poured out two more drinks. He was becoming interested in the man who had so unfeelingly dragged him from his bed before even the dawn had come. There were few new faces in his life, and one could get so stale with only farm labourers and petty shopkeepers to talk to. Besides, he was feeling wide awake now, and cold, despite the burning log which had now caught and was roaring up the chimney. Yes, a drink was clearly indicated.

Methuen thanked him and continued:

"I spent the first week trying to persuade a Cumbrian of Scotch ancestry to start a new line of P.O.P., but could make as much impression on him as I could on a piece of concrete by beating it with a feather. The next few days I wandered about the neighbouring villages, pushing the same and other articles, but without much success, and at last I decided to make for the Workington

and Whitehaven district. Accordingly I mounted my motor-bike late last night in an endeavour to reach the Royal Hotel, Whitehaven, in time for a bath and a good night's rest before starting early the next morning on my rounds ; but Fate was against me.

"I was in the middle of a desolate tract of moorland when my bike 'conked out', and on dismounting I found that somehow my petrol tank had received a dinge, whether my fault or through the carelessness of the people at the last garage, I don't know, and was leaking badly. It was, in fact, entirely empty ; and on examining my spare tin, which I always carry, I discovered that someone had been liberally helping himself, and there were only a few drops left. I plugged the hole as best I could with a piece of chewing-gum—useful stuff that—and refilling with my remaining spot of juice, recommenced my journey. I had got no further than a quarter of a mile or so when the darn thing petered out again ; my mending had been futile, I was stranded.

"It was by now about ten o'clock at night, pitch-dark, and as far as I could estimate, at least six miles to the nearest village. I looked about for a house or farm of some sort, but could see nothing, and to add to my discomfort a thick moorland mist began to creep up.

He broke off.

"You know this country well, I presume ?"

"Passably," admitted the doctor.

"Well, I don't, and I don't mind confessing that I found myself growing horribly afraid. Here was I, a stranger, landed miles from anywhere, absolutely alone on the Cumberland moors, without a sight or a sound of a living human being, and that accursed mist growing denser every second. It was ghastly !"

Methuen stopped, and putting his left hand before his eyes made a movement as though to wipe away the recollection. Then he seemed to steady himself with an effort, and resumed :

"I am not considered a coward so far as I know by my acquaintances, but here, somehow, I seemed to get an

impression of evil—*intense evil*, as though something malevolent was with me, watching me, gloating over my inability to get away. 'I could almost feel its vile breath upon me, the pressure of something like tentacles stealing softly about my body with a sickening gentleness, like some loathsome caress, luring me, urging me, forcing me onward towards a gap in the hedge. I struggled, but to resist was useless. I was powerless in the grasp of this strange malign influence.

"Imagine my joy, then, when on reaching the gap and stepping through I felt this evil presence slip from my shoulders like a discarded mantle, and saw facing me the very shelter that I sought—an inn. It was like a friendly gesture in a foreign country!

"It stood, it is true, entirely in darkness; but I had no doubt that I could soon rouse the landlord, and visions of a hearty supper of ham and eggs, well fried, with perhaps a tankard of ale, rose rapidly before my eyes.

"This side of the hedge the feeling of fear had entirely vanished, and I laughed at myself for my qualms of a few moments before. The path to the inn lay almost hidden among a mass of straggling undergrowth, and this and the overhanging trees must have accounted for my not noticing it from the road.

"It was quite a fair-sized building, a low rambling structure of old-world design, and swinging creakily in the cool night air I recognized a painted signboard, though it was too dark for me to read its portent from where I was standing. Though I noticed nothing unusual at the time, I may say that since it has struck me forcibly that there was something uncanny in the fact that, although the other side of the hedge the mist was thick and the air still as death, here, in what might be called the garden of the inn, there was no mist, and little currents of wind eddied about through the trees, fanning my face and swinging the great signboard with a strange persistency. I went up to the door and knocked loudly. My motor-bike could remain where I had left it, for I had quite made up my mind that wild horses would not

drag me back into that ghastly atmosphere I had just encountered in the road.

"At first there was no response, and I repeated the summons, examining the old tavern more closely during the period I was kept waiting. Here, under the eaves of the porch, I could now discern—my eyes having become accustomed to the darkness—some semblance of a picture half-obliterated by exposure to many seasons of wind and rain, upon the inn sign. This was in the nature of a coffin supported by six headless bearers goose-stepping towards a white headstone, and underneath this somewhat forbidding daub, with grim irony ran the legend: 'Ye Journey's End.'

"Evidently the landlord was a man with either a peculiar sense of humour or gifted with an enormous propensity for continuing a tradition, for it was plain that the inn was a relic of ancient and more stirring days, and it was possible that his love of old things made him hesitate to change this gruesome, though exceedingly interesting, old sign.

"While I was thus conjecturing I heard a movement within the house, and a faint glimmer of light appeared from behind one of the windows above the porch to my right. After an appreciable pause this was suddenly extinguished, and I concluded that whoever was within the inn had decided they had imagined my knocking and retired to bed again. I had just raised my hand to deliver a sound drubbing to the massive front door when I sensed, rather than heard, a faint *flip-flop* of loosely-slippered feet approaching the door from the inside. The next instant came the welcome sound of heavy iron bolts being withdrawn, and the big door swung slowly inwards.

"The man who confronted me was a singularly unprepossessing individual, and I had a sensation, as I viewed him, as though someone had lightly run a brush fitted with many sharp-pointed and icy bristles down my spinal column.

"He stood squarely before me, a short squat man, with

a smooth round face white as a full moon and entirely hairless. An old-fashioned nightcap covered his scalp, and about his shoulders depended a long cloak of some dark colour. But what struck the greatest chill of all, was this—he *had no eyes*!

"From the bald place where the eyebrows should have been, to the top of the puffy cheeks, stretched a thick layer of parchment-like skin, and he groped before him with his hands, using them like the antennæ of some fat white slug. Ugh!"

Methuen shivered, and the doctor leaned forward in his chair. "Go on!" he said.

"Behind him stood a woman holding an old-fashioned candlestick, and the contrast between them was extraordinary. She was of middle height and of a good figure, and was draped in a kind of wrapper of filmy texture. A very goddess of a creature!

"She was handsome in a rather impudent, bold way, full-lipped and black-browed, and her large eyes seemed to glow with a strange lustre as she stood there watching me.

"I explained my circumstances and asked for shelter, and at the sound of my voice the landlord—for I presume it was he—reached out for my face, feeling it all over with his pulpy fingers as if to satisfy himself as to my appearance.

"I suppose the woman must have seen the look of disgust upon my features, for she called out to him, 'Let him enter, he will do well enough', and at the words he stood aside and beckoned me in. I may as well tell you now that had there been anything, even a barn or a fowl-house, in the neighbourhood where I could have spent the night secure from the cold and the penetrating damp of the mist, I would have sought it rather than pass an hour here. But this was no time to indulge fancies. I was a stranger and must count myself lucky to be admitted, and if my landlord filled me with a strange, unaccountable dread, I should have to put up with it unless I wished once more to face the terrors of that awful road outside.

"I entered, and the woman silently conducted me to a bedroom on the first floor. I should have stated before that the inn had only the two stories, and I was now immediately below the roof. At my request for some supper and a bath she shook her head, and concluding that probably she was tired, I let it go at that, after first regretting that I had disturbed her slumbers, and wishing her a 'good night'. She smiled mysteriously and withdrew with a little curtsy, closing the door after her. I was alone in the room.

"I glanced round it ; it was bare enough but it would do. In one corner was a small washhand-stand and towels, a couple of chairs stood against one wall, and against another was a massive oak chest. A huge four-poster bed occupied nearly the whole of one side of the room, and the remaining side was entirely bare except for a small door, which, on my trying it, refused to yield. I put my eye to the keyhole and peeped through, but of course could make out nothing because of the darkness.

"Well, I was tired and began to undress. My one illumination was a vast bronze lamp, so heavy that it must have taken three men to place it where it now stood on a pedestal in the corner near the window, and the bad light it gave made me wish my hosts had a little less love of the antique and a little more of ordinary everyday comfort. As I gratefully threw off my clothes, I considered. Surely that bold beauty who had guided me to my room could not be the wife of that monstrosity who had met me at the door ? And if so, what a terrible existence for her ! To be shut up with such a creature alone on these desolate moors—what wrong could a mere girl do to merit such a diabolical punishment ? It was against the laws of Nature ! It was an outrage ! Thus my chivalrous spirit took up the cause of beauty, and condemned the beast.

"At last, when I was ready for bed, the yearning for a bath once more came over me.

"I wondered—was it possible ?—and crossed once more to the little door in the wall. Yes, it was locked,

but that alone would not deter me. I have always made a point of carrying with me any old keys that I have ever used or even found, in case they may come in useful later on. My idiosyncrasy was rewarded, and on trying one of my bunch in the lock, to my joy I found it fitted.

"I turned it and the door opened. Rapture—a bathroom! Dirty, ill-kept, but still the joy of all Englishmen—a *bathroom*! I glanced round for a candle, as the lamp was too heavy to shift, but, as usual, when one needs a thing it is never to be found anywhere. Well, I would bathe in the dark, that was all!

"I turned on the tap. Even in the gloom, with only the light which escaped from my bedroom to see by, I could see that the water ran dark with iron, or, more probably, rust from disuse and the old pipes and cistern which wheezed and gurgled over my head. The bath itself was an iron one of primitive construction, not like the enamelled luxuries we are used to to-day. I returned to my room while the water ran, or, rather, trickled, and tried my bed.

"Here at any rate was comfort, and again I laughed at my earlier fears. I might fare a great deal worse than spend a night on this feathered mattress, and if I filched a bath, even a cold one, and no one the wiser—well, it was all to the good. I began at last to consider myself in luck's way. I whistled cheerfully as I returned to the bathroom and slipped off my dressing-gown; I chuckled at my deceit as I turned off the water and stepped into the bath. Then I caught my breath, transfixed. God in heaven! What was this?

"The sides and bottom of the bath were thick and slippery with blood! I reeled and leapt out, and then for a moment I think I must have fainted.

"When I recovered I was lying at the side of that foul receptacle, and my feet and ankles were red with the rapidly congealing fluid, which something told me was unquestionably the lifeblood of a human being.

At first I was too dazed to think coherently. The

macabre ablutions I had so nearly performed were too hideous to contemplate. When at last my strength had returned sufficiently to permit me to regain my own room and wipe the malodorous beastliness, now grown sticky and glutinous, from my feet with my towel, I felt better, and tried to consider the whole affair in a calm light. It seemed impossible ! Yet there were the vile stains upon my towel to convince me that I had suffered no monstrous hallucination. It was real ! It was horrible ! It was harrowing, revolting, but undeniably true !

"For how long I remained sitting hunched upon my bed, striving to collect my scattered wits, I do not know. It may have been five minutes, but it seemed an eternity.

"At last I gathered my things together and began to dress. To sleep was impossible with the knowledge of that horror lying so near and so silent in the next room. For that the body was concealed somewhere within that fatal bathroom I had no doubt ; the body of the poor victim drained of his blood as though he had been sucked dry by some mighty leech, which in turn had disgorged its ghastly meal into that reeking bath.

"A leech ! In a flash it came to me, the simile I had sought to fit to my blind landlord. That was what it was he reminded me of so forcibly—a great loathsome white leech, glutted with blood, and greedy, greedy for *more* !

"Who would be next ? I shuddered, then I flew to the window. No ! Escape that way was out of the question, for I saw now what had previously eluded my notice. From top to bottom of my window, fixed firmly into the masonry, ran six stout iron bars, and whatever else in the inn might have fallen into decay, these remained in a perfect state of preservation.

"I ran to the door —*it was locked* ! I was a prisoner !

"Then as I stood there wondering what to do, I heard again the steady *flip-flop, flip-flop* of loosely-fitting slippers on the stairs. They came nearer, nearer ; they reached my door ; they ceased !

"Watching with eyes dilated with fear, I saw the

lock slip noiselessly back in its socket and the door knob begin to turn slowly, almost imperceptibly, round.

"I stood rooted to the spot, paralysed with terror, my heart pounding in my throat, the blood hammering in my temples with the noise of muffled drums.

"The silence was awful!

"Not a sound broke the stillness save the whistling of my breath between my teeth and the slow drip-drip-drip from the bathroom tap. Then I felt a tremor of icy air fan my cheek, which gradually grew to a steady draught—the door was stealthily opening!

"Somehow I found my voice.

"'Go away!' I screamed, a thin, unnatural sound, and threw my whole weight against this last barrier between myself and—*What?* I felt a moment's resistance, then it yielded and shut, and as I lay clawing at the panels in a paroxysm of fright, I heard the shuffling footsteps recede until once more absolute stillness reigned. For some minutes longer I lay there panting, cursing myself for a coward, and wondering why I had not brained the blind horror and made good my escape, but somehow it seemed that in the presence of this creature every vestige of manliness was drained from me, and I was left a craven, cowed by the awful sense of evil that emanated from him.

"After a little while I plucked up my courage and opened the door. The landing was in darkness, but what was more important, the key was missing from the other side of the door. It was consequently impossible for me to lock myself in, and not for a kingdom would I risk an attempt to get out that way.

"I closed the door again, and, crossing the room, tried to shift the great oak chest. With a big effort I found this to be possible, so bit by bit I eased it nearer, until at last it rested across my threshold, and I heaved a sigh of relief.

"Here at any rate was a barrier to be reckoned with! Now there was nothing for it but to wait until daylight, and leaving the lamp still burning, I flung myself down

fully dressed on the bed, resolved to bear with the circumstances as best I could.

"I have mentioned that the bed was an old four-poster one, and it was hung with faded green curtains which depended in the usual style from the canopy overhead to my right and left and round at the back, excluding all draught.

As I lay there I examined these with idle interest, casting my eyes up until I reached the canopy itself.

"I am not fastidious, as you may have guessed, but if there is one insect which fills me with more disgust than another it is a spider, and there, dangling by a single thread immediately above my face, was a great fat monster of the species. A long point of metal stuck down from the middle of the canopy, which had been used, I conjectured, at some time for forming the base of a swinging lantern, and from this the insect had spun its web across to one of the poles at the head of the bed. He had now returned to the centre of his trap, and as I have said, dangled precariously over my face.

"I watched him, fascinated, but by now I was worn out, and from time to time caught myself dozing. I strove to keep awake, but Nature asserted herself, and at last I succumbed to her wooing. I slept.

"The next thing I remember was feeling the plop of the wretched insect as it landed on my cheek and scuttled down my neck. With a smothered cry I leapt from my bed, and as I did so the long metal point fell with a swish and embedded itself in the depression just vacated by my body. I tell you, sir, that spider saved my life!

"Wondering, and not a little afraid, I ungratefully brushed the creature from my person and approached the bed. Then I think I realized what it meant. That metal point was part of a long spearlike contrivance, whose shaft vanished through a small hole in the ceiling, the whole being the most damnable invention for murder ever conceived by the brain of a fiend!

"Its fall had broken the web, and, presumably, the preliminary trembling of the shaft before its release had

frightened the spider, which had alighted on my face, warning me in its turn.

"A Providential escape !

"As I paused irresolute in the middle of the room I thought I heard a slight movement outside the door, but may have been mistaken. I waited a few moments longer to reassure myself that this was but the outcome of extreme nervous tension, and stood listening intently. Then from behind the wall at the side of the bed there came the unmistakeable sound of something scratching softly, scratching and fumbling, and the sound of a click.

"I wheeled round.

"Slowly, very slowly, a crack appeared in the wall itself, and from within showed the faint glimmer of a light.

"In a trice I was across the room and had put out my lamp. This time I had no intention of letting my fears overcome my faculties. With the courage born of desperation I forced myself again to enter that loathsome bathroom and pushed the door to, taking care to leave it just sufficiently ajar to enable me to watch whatever might be about to occur, while at the same time keeping myself free from observation. From my new point of vantage I saw the gap in the panel widen, I saw the pulpy hands like the *attennæ* of a huge slug come feeling along the wall, and then, like the obscene figment of an unhealthy imagination, my landlord stepped into the room. For a moment he paused, listening, his hands pawing the air before him as if uncertain of his direction, and then stealthily, noiselessly he turned and moved, groping towards my bed.

"Behind him, framed in the space of the open panel, stood the woman, her hand still grasping the candle in the same way in which she had met me at the door, but on her face was such an expression of ghoulish exultation that I shivered, for only a devil could exult as she did then.

"By now the man had reached the side of the bed, and softly his hands felt over the sheets, groping, groping.

They touched the spear-shaft, and with a sound like the contented purr of a giant cat he slid his hands down the shaft, feeling for the body which had so lately lain there.

"Suddenly he snarled and started back, and at the sound the woman came into the room. With one glance she comprehended the situation and seized him by the arm.

"'Quick! The bathroom!' she whispered, and half-pushing, half-dragging the blind, groping creature, moved swiftly in my direction. There was no time to lose. Like a flash I cast round for some means of egress from this charnel-house. Above the cistern, which was over the bath, something winked and twinkled—a star. Like lightning I clawed my way up the pipes to the skylight, and lay there gasping. A foul stench assailed my nostrils, but I dare not move. Indeed, I had hardly gained the top of the cistern and flung myself flat before the door opened and my pursuers stood on the threshold. Would they see me?

"I think I prayed then as I have never prayed before. Right from my heart I sent up a cry to heaven for assistance.

"The woman said something and stooped, feeling under the bath. When she stood up again I saw that she held an axe in her hand, and she began to laugh horribly. It was like the roar of a wild animal that smells raw meat.

"'Come down!' she cried. 'You must pay for your lodging,' and, when I made no movement, thrust the candle into the man's hand and made to climb up after me.

"It was the work of a second to put my elbow through the glass and break the window, and as I struggled to get through I heard her clambering up after me with the agility of a young tigress.

"Once I slipped and fell, striking the lid of the cistern, which gave beneath my weight, and my feet and hands came in contact with some soft and flabby substance.

I looked down—horror of horrors! *I was kneeling on a heap of mutilated corpses!*

"Men and women were there, some untouched by the hand of corruption, others in the final stages of decomposition; the bodies of wayfarers like myself who had tasted the hospitality of this appalling inn.

"I scrambled out, and, reaching the window, threw myself out upon the sloping tiles of the roof. I could see the face of the woman distorted with fury, as she, too, began to squeeze her way through the skylight. I edged myself nearer the eaves to a spot where a branch of a tree overhung the roof, holding out promise of escape. I had almost grasped this blessed branch in my hands, when suddenly my foot slipped on a piece of moss and I slithered to the edge and clung there with all my might.

"To fall now might mean a broken limb, and that spelt capture, with all that it entailed.

"I hesitated and was lost.

"With a scream of triumph the woman was upon me. Horrified, I saw her whirl the axe aloft. Hypnotized, I watched the instrument descend, relentless, cruel, and heard it swish as it cleaved the air. Then there came a stinging sensation in my right hand, and I found myself slipping, falling to the ground below.

"Somehow I staggered to my feet and fled.

"How long I ran through the night like a mad thing I don't know. I only know that when at last I did look back for a possible pursuer, the place where the inn had stood was a blaze of flame, and the sky above glowed crimson in the surrounding darkness."

Methuen ceased, and the sweat was standing out in great beads on his brow, as though he had lived again his harrowing experience.

"Very interesting," remarked the doctor. "So the inn caught fire? How was that?"

"I can only conclude that when the woman gave the blind man the candle to hold he must have placed it against his flannelette nightgown inadvertantly, and

blundered out of the bathroom in his panic, to come up against some such draperies as those about the four-poster."

The doctor smiled.

"You are certainly adept at explaining things," he admitted.

Methuen rose and went behind his chair. He was very pale, and placed his left hand on the back of it as though to support himself as he faced the doctor.

"So you *do* think I'm mad?" he exclaimed slowly.

The doctor shrugged.

"Then how do you account for this?"

With a sudden gesture he withdrew his right arm from his coat pocket and thrust it out before him.

All four fingers of the hand were missing, and the roughly improvised bandages hung loosely, sticky and wet with blood.

Dr. Sutton caught him as he swayed and fell.

THE END